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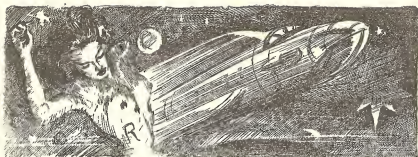
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EGON SCHIELE



illustrator: Everett Raymond Kinstler

In the prophylactic, chlorophyll-freshened brave new world of the future it is reasonably certain that the technology of man will work some wondrous physical changes. But can thousands of years strengthen the weak spots in the nature of humans? Can centuries rid the human being of his petty hatreds, his blindnesses, his fears and distrust of anything strange or different?

Alfred Coppel's story tells what happens when man builds a machine in his own image and then finds to his utter horror that he abhors the thing he has created!

For Humans Only

by ALFRED COPPEL

IT WAS EARLY when I arrived at the rocket port. I figured it would be best that way, because the *Queen of Heaven* was an all-human ship. I thought I'd just get aboard and stay out of the way. I didn't want any trouble—I'd had enough. The big, bloody "R" scrawled on my door and the bricks through the window were still raw memories. And I would never forget the shouting men burning crosses in the streets outside. I'm not brave, I guess. I put in for resettlement to Mars after they burned my place down near the river. It was just a piece of bad luck that the Transport Authority booked me over on an all-human boat.

It was around nineteen when I got to the port. The *Queen of Heaven* was scheduled to lift at twenty-fifteen, but she was on the ramp already, with a lot of tankers and cats milling around in the lee of atmosphere fins.

She was so big she scared me, the mirror-bright bulk of her hull against the cloudy, sooty blackness was something to see.

I presented myself to the gate guard, showing him my Transport Authority ticket.

He looked up and snorted. "Got yourself a free ride, have you, 'R'-boy?"

"Yes, sir," I said, shifting uncomfortably.

"You know it's a one-way ticket, don't you?" He squinted up at me, and I fought down a tiny surge of resentment. I wondered futilely why it was that so many humans treated us as though we were children—or mental defectives.

"Yes, sir," I said again. "I understand that."

"Goddam tough out on Mars, 'R'-boy," he said with relish.

I nodded agreement. I wanted him to validate my ticket, not brief me on conditions of life in the Mars colony; but I've had a lot of these one-sided conversations with humans since I left the Creche. It simply doesn't pay to be impatient or impertinent.

"Okay," he said. "On the scale." He jerked a thumb at the platform beside his desk.

I climbed up.

"Holy Jesus," he said. "Two forty-five. They make you bastards heavy enough." He sighed and pulled out a form. "Okay, 'R'-boy. Get down. Now—age, height?"

"Thirty years. Height six-five."

He rolled the form into a machine and typed rapidly.

"Let's see. Religion, next of kin—we can skip all that. Your cabin assignment will be D-deck, core-section. . . ."

I'd never been inside a spaceship before, but I thought I knew where my cabin would be. Down near the tail, where the rumble of the jets would shake everything for hours on end, and where the stink of hydrogenol would taint the air. But, what the hell, I thought. What does it matter? I could even see the human point of view. Segregating a minority in the restricted area of a space vessel presented problems.

"What about baggage?"

I put my single scuffed suitcase on the scales.

"Fifty-three pounds. You're eight pounds over," the man said.

"The Transport Authority said I could have sixty," I said.

"Are you trying to argue with me, 'R'-boy?"

"No, sir."

"If you want to get on the *Queen*, you'll take forty-five pounds aboard and no more, see?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now get rid of eight pounds and let's not get snotty. Do it now."

"Okay," I said sullenly.

"What was that?" His head was cocked aggressively to one side. I remembered the hooded men and their burning crosses. I swallowed the taste of gall in my mouth and said: "Yes, sir."

"Get at it." He turned away from me to greet a handful of human passengers cordially. I retired to a corner of the area and opened my suitcase.

Right on top was Elna's picture. That wasn't her name, of course, because robots don't have names. But among ourselves we called her Elna. The picture, I thought, could go. I didn't need it any more. My last memory of Elna was the way she looked in the back of the grimy pickup truck back in Fresno when the gangs of white-sheeted humans raided the robot barracks on the farm where we worked. That was a long time back. No, I wouldn't need the picture any more. That, with the frame, was some weight saved, anyhow.

And then there was the old and tattered copy of John Donne's works. I remembered the little bookstore in New York where I'd bought it—right on the edge of the Radiated Area near the park, in the rubble-strewn street behind what long ago was the Plaza. I thought briefly of the two gray old men who ran the shop. They hadn't thought it at all strange that a robot—a test-tube man, they called me—might want an old copy of Donne. But that was a long time ago, I thought. I'd had a lot of pleasure from the book and the two old men who hadn't stared at the tattooed "R" on my forehead were probably dead by now. That was another three or four pounds saved.

And the two record tapes of Bach and Scarlatti. I didn't have a player, anyway. And besides, I told myself, there must be music in the Mars colony. I wouldn't have to bring my own. Surely, the hundreds of robots who had accepted resettlement couldn't have ignored the obvious fact that music was a non-segregable pleasure. So the record tapes could stay, too.

I closed the suitcase and waited until the human passengers had finished checking in and then I weighed my things again. Forty-four pounds.

I laid Elna's picture on the desk with the book and the record tapes. The man glanced at it and showed his teeth in what could have been a smile.

"Not bad," he said suggestively. "Leaving that behind, 'R'-boy?"

"She's dead," I said in a flat voice.

"Tough," the man said.

"Do I pass now?" I asked.

"Sure, okay. That way." He pointed toward the ship.

As I walked through the wire gate, I heard him call an attendant.

"Shovel all this crud into the burner, George. What? Yeah, that too. She's a looker all right but she's *kaput*, you goddam 'R'-chaser. . . ."

I went up the ramp and into the valve without taking a last look at Earth.

The cabin was what I had expected.

I stowed my gear and read the printed instructions on the bulkhead. They said I should report to the main salon twenty minutes before lift time to listen to one of the officers tell about emergencies and such.

I asked a crewman—a big, burly tubeman—where the salon was. He looked at the tattoo on my forehead and pointed up a circular steel ramp. "That way," he said.

I found the salon all right and went in. A few of the other passengers were already there. All humans. I stood in a corner and tried to make myself inconspicuous, which isn't easy in a room fifteen by ten when you are six feet five with a red "R" on your forehead.

I could see by the way they were watching me that most of them hadn't known there would be an android passenger. Some of them looked and forgot. Others looked and kept looking, and talking among themselves in low whispers. I wondered how it would be, cooped up inside a three-hundred-foot cylinder with twenty-one humans for three weeks.

After a few minutes' wait, an officer came in and gave a short talk on space flight and what we were all expected to do in case of trouble and where the escape hatches and the space armor was and things like that. The *Queen of Heaven* was going the slow way, circling the Moon and then heading out toward Mars and the outer planets. A real space cruise for people who could afford the best. I kept telling myself I was lucky to be sent out to the colony on a vessel like this.

One of the passengers, a girl about twenty, came over and stood beside me. She looked me up and down and began asking questions.

"Are you really a robot?"

I don't remember what I said. I guess I said "yes," though the question was about as silly as it could get in view of my size and the red "R."

"Down where I come from, there aren't any robots at all," she said.

I stood shifting my weight from one foot to another and wishing she would go away and leave me alone. People were looking at us. The officer's face was stony.

"That's Johannesburg," she said. "You know, in South Africa. There just aren't any robots there."

But there used to be, I thought. There used to be plenty working in the mines until the humans remembered their history and began getting restless about the number of artificial men among them. There had been

stories about robots raping human women—which were ridiculous, since sex wasn't the same for a robot as it was for a man and all robots were nurtured in the plastic sacs of the Creche. But there had been talk and then sporadic trouble and finally riots, and now there were no more robots in South Africa. Or in Atlanta, Georgia, or in Chicago, or in Birmingham, Alabama, or in Los Angeles. That's the way it was. So this honey-blonde girl had never seen a real robot. . . .

A man—her father maybe—took her hand and pulled her away. "For God's sake, Mary. . . ."

No one else came near me during the meeting. Finally the officer checked his watch and said we should all go back to our cabins and get ready for takeoff.

On my way out, he stopped me.

"Look," he said. "I don't want any trouble on this trip. The TA shouldn't have saddled me with—well, never mind. *Just let's not have any trouble.*"

"I don't want any trouble," I said through stiff lips.

"Well, that's good. Just behave yourself and stay out from underfoot. I'll have the steward bring your meals to your cabin. I don't want any unpleasantness, see? Mind you, I've got nothing against you personally and nothing against robots. But the other passengers. . . ."

He broke off, as though expecting me to understand just what he meant without his having to say it. Sure, I thought, I do understand. I should. Men made robots to make life easier. They did. And then men found they had another race on their hands—one that wasn't even human. What a massive guilt complex that gave them!

"All right," I said. "There won't be anything like that." I won't rape the women or drink up all the ship's liquor or be loud and strident or corral all the money on board through some mysterious non-human alchemy, I thought. I just want to get to Mars.

"They don't wear bedsheets on Mars," I said.

"What?"

"I mean I won't get in the way."

"That's a good fellow," he said.

Yassuh, I thought. Yassuh, boss.

I went back to my cabin, and as I passed the salon bulkhead, I saw a new sign on the door. In very neat black letters it said: *Human Passengers Only.*

The first week of the trip out wasn't anything to remember. In fact, I saw none of it. My cabin was not near the pressure hull and I had no port opening out onto the vistas of space. The thrum of the jets was an

all-pervading beat I soon learned to live with and the smell of hydrogenol never thinned.

I took my meals in my room, remembering the sign on the door of the salon. I liked it better that way, actually. I've never felt at ease with humans. Maybe I would if they let themselves be easy with me, but that never seemed to work out. The red "R" and the signs—always neat, generally black lettering on white backgrounds—made a gulf between us that neither I nor the humans I had known could ignore.

I thought a lot about Mars during the first week. There were rumors, of course. About the new world the robots were making out on the dead sea-bottoms of the red planet. Some said there were no human beings at all on Mars—only robots. And I'd heard talk that another, bigger Creche was being built out there to make the race of robots completely independent of the mother world. But somehow, I couldn't help thinking that all these things were dreams and nonsense. Men and robots would never be free of one another, I felt. They were bound together by ties both hated and neither could ever break. I suspected that Mars, the robot's paradise, couldn't really be very different from Earth. Yet I hoped. I hoped for a world and a life with a bit of dignity and—am I a fool?—equality.

It was after fourteen days in space that the *Queen of Heaven* hit the meteor swarm.

I was asleep and never felt the impact. It was the voice of the captain coming through the intercom that woke me. All passengers were to gather in the salon. I remember that I missed the thrumming of the jets. The ship was in free-fall, and the artificial gravity was less than normal. I felt light and giddy.

At the open door of the salon, I stopped. The sign was still there.

The captain, a smallish, red-faced man with a waxed moustache, called to me.

"For God's sake get in here! Never mind that!"

So the sign suddenly didn't matter. We must be in serious trouble, I thought.

The passengers were all there, looking small and frightened. The steward shut the door, dogging it down. The captain looked around and cleared his throat.

"At zero seven five one this morning," he said with a frown, "the *Queen of Heaven* encountered a meteor swarm. A small meteor swarm," he amended hastily. "There has been no serious damage and no one has been hurt. . . ."

He left the sentence hanging helplessly in midair and cleared his throat again. "However . . ."

I felt something like a cold draught blowing through my insides. Fear is fear, no matter whether the person feeling it is natural or artificial.

"... however, one rather bulky meteor has lodged itself in the main venturi, jamming the graphite steering vanes. We have been attempting for several hours to dislodge it, but it is a job that requires a great deal of physical strength."

For a moment, no one spoke. It didn't need to be said that the *Queen* was helpless with that rock caught in her craw.

One of the passengers, the father of the honey blonde, asked: "Can you cut it out with a torch?"

"No," the captain said testily. "There is residual hydrogenol in the venturi that would ignite and blow anyone holding the torch to kingdom come." He looked all around the room and finally his eyes settled on me. "It is a job for strength. The rock has to be pushed free and out of the jet."

I didn't say anything. I simply stood, conscious of my two hundred forty-five pounds of muscle and my six feet five of height. I was afraid; I'll admit it frankly. And I didn't want to go into the tube where a wrong move could send me spilling out into space to become a meteorite of flesh and blood. And maybe I was thinking about the sign on the door of the salon and all the thousands of other signs just like it I'd seen all my life. All right, I was thinking, the world is theirs, the ship is theirs. Let them fix it themselves.

"Hell," someone said. "Don't ask. Just send him. It's a job for the 'R'-boy—"

It was a natural thing to say.

I thought about Mars and how much I wanted to get there. I let my mind dwell on red hills and freedom instead of the tube and the cold night outside the ship.

"All right," I said. "I'll be glad to do it."

The interior of the tube was a dark nightmare; a circular maw with stars in its throat. Crammed into a pressure suit made for a man two inches shorter than I, I worked my way toward the steering vane, unsteady on the curving surface.

Alone in the dark with my fear, I remembered:

... Elna in a tumbril, being carried away from me into a flame-splashed night with a human lynch mob howling for blood.

... a hotel in Los Angeles—shabby, dirty—and the sneering face of a pimply desk clerk saying: "We don't take no 'R'-boys here."

... a burning cross in the night and the tinkle of shattering glass. The smell of scorched flesh.

... and signs everywhere. *Humans Only*.

It is said that in times of danger one remembers his whole life in flashing

images. That doesn't just apply to men. I remembered the Creche and the rows of parturient sacs, pulsating with artificial life. I saw again the spinning crystals in the groined ceilings and heard the whispering voices of our teachers. I sensed thirty years of life as a second class man—an inferior copy of humanity. The artificial thoughts echoed through my artificial brain in my artificial skull. *Serve man, serve man, serve man. . . .*

I laid hands on the rock jammed into the vane and strained against it. *Serve man, serve man . . .*

I was fulfilling my purpose. I could not help myself. I tried to tell myself that it was for Mars and freedom, but I knew better.

Once, my foot slipped, and for a horrible moment I tumbled with nightmare slowness toward the star-flecked opening of the venturi. But I caught myself and went back to the vane and the stubborn rock and in the end I freed it. The cold stone spun the length of the tube and out into the night of space.

With my breath frozen in my throat by cold and fear of lonely death, I returned to the bright interior of the *Queen of Heaven*.

They gathered around me as I peeled out of the space armor. Some of them even shook my hand and thanked me. I remember thinking: they're grateful. I served them and they are grateful.

The spaceship came alive under me; the decks hummed with the beat of the jet and life began again. Someone had taken the sign on the door of the salon down and all around me were smiling faces—human faces.

In that tiny island of life in the cold gulf of space, I knew what it meant to be a man.

Mars. . . .

Cobalt sky and red sand hills and the sun and the stars shining together.

I stood in the open valve of the *Queen* and looked out at the rocket port.

All the human passengers had debarked. I stood in a warm glow, remembering the handshakes and the thanks and the smiles of friendship.

I took my scuffed old suitcase and walked down the ramp to the red, drifting sand. In the distance, beyond the wire, I could see buildings. Some white and clean in the pale sunlight and others ragged frame, their tar paper sides whipping in the thin wind.

I walked toward the near gate, the air clean and fresh in my face.

A hand caught at my sleeve. It was a uniformed port guard. He pointed at the gate.

"Not this way," he said.

The sign over the wire gate read: *Humans Only*.

Their history was a folk tale, and in a desperate bid to prove the legend, their explorers plunged across the airless, empty expanses of open space! But legends are as intangible as dreams, and everyone knows that dreams cannot be proved. . . .



*Like Gods
They Came*

by IRVING COX, JR.

WE RETURNED to a strangling bleakness, to a whole people suddenly lost and drifting without purpose. Naturally the news had preceded us; it was inconceivable that we should not have sent back the truth as soon as we knew it.

No one blamed us, of course, but the heart was torn out of the celebration. Long before our sleek space sphere settled into the landing ways the flags and streamers had been taken down. There were no cheering crowds to greet us, no clattering mobs of reporters, no batteries of televue machines. For all the notice that was taken of our expedition, we might have been nothing more than a routine flight in from one of our own planet-colonies.

And it was better so.

I took the slow-surface tube home. I needed the time to think, to organize the story I would tell Alyria. I hadn't expected her to meet me at the field, for we had intentionally made no announcement of the time of our arrival. We wanted as little fuss about it as possible.

It was painful for me to remember the exciting light of hope that had been in Alyria's eyes the night before we left. When all the civic ceremonies were over, I took her to the Recreo-roof. We had planned to share a whiff of neurogas by way of a private celebration of our own. But we both found the banter and the laughter of the throng too much for us. We went out on the roof where we could be alone.

We sat on one of the benches just beyond the rocket runway. Below us we could see the glitter of city lights, flashing gems forming a geometric pattern on the night velvet; and, above us, the curving sphere of the universe. Like a naive schoolgirl, Alyria pointed out the planets of our own system, naming them and their colonies. Then her finger swept in a dramatic arc toward a tiny pinpoint of light, and a shiver of nervous anticipation shook her body.

"There it is," she whispered, reaching for my hand. "How long will it take?"

"The trip? With the new power, perhaps a year," I answered.

"And a year more before you return." She sighed. "We have waited so long, two years should mean nothing. But I have so little patience! Now that we are about to find them again, a day stretches into an eternity."

"But you can follow us on the view-screen. You will see what we do."

"That isn't the same thing! I want to see them as they really are, to talk to them, to know their thoughts and their wisdom as our ancestors did!" She got up and leaned against the guard-rail, staring up at the sky. A mystic, dreamy tone crept into her voice. "Think what it means. Think what it means! After so many centuries, we have found them again!"

I never flatter myself that I am anything more than an ordinary technician, a designer of machines. My art and my understanding are commonplace beside Alyria's. She is a researcher into the mechanism of society, a Keeper of the Legend. I can never follow her into her loftier visions; her intuitions and insights are wonders to me as our first space spheres must have been to my grandfather. Yet I understood Alyria's feelings then. There was not a man in our world who did not share it. There was no child, no tottering Elder, who was not looking up at the skies that night and whispering the same golden words.

For as long as the history of our people has been recorded we have dreamed the same dream. A thousand years ago our intelligentsia laughed at it; they told us it was a story invented by a primitive people to explain things they could not understand. As our society matured in its control of

physical things, the story of the gods came to seem more and more improbable. Only a few faithful visionaries preserved it; we honor them, today, in their children, by calling them Keepers of the Legend.

It was not until we conquered space and established colonies in the planets of our own sun system, not until our astronomers had devices for measuring the ends of the universe, that we suddenly understood the truth.

The Legend told us we had been established in the beginning as a planet colony of a great race. They were a people who had all wisdom and knew all science. The universe was theirs, and we were the last outpost of their civilization. We thrived as long as they kept in touch with us.

Then, suddenly, they no longer came to our world. Why, we never knew. They had been our teachers and technicians, and without them we were helpless. The Golden Age died and became a legend itself. We forgot everything we had learned from them. Our society collapsed into savagery; we could no longer speak their tongue or use their symbols; we forgot their law and their ethic.

On the brink of chaos our descent halted. We began to climb slowly back to knowledge. One by one we mastered the sciences. We experimented blindly with politico-economic systems until greed and war taught us how to build a planetary brotherhood. And we discovered the power for space travel. Only then did we begin to examine the old Legend seriously. The pattern conformed to our most recently verified data. The Legend, then, was the ultimate truth of our being; it was within our power to find the gods again!

That was a century ago.

Our astronomers and our historians for a century examined and reinterpreted the ancient records. For a century they studied the limitless reaches of the universe, seeking the home-place of the gods. It required a patience and a persistence that only the united hope of a whole people could support. Everything we did was channeled toward that one goal. At last we had our reward. Two years ago we isolated the distant sun system from which we had come, and six months later our scientists knew precisely which of the planets in that system was the home of our gods.

All this Alyria talked of as we stood on the roof looking up at the stars. Her words had the familiar incantation of an enchantment, for she spoke from the soul of our people. Our hope lit stars in her eyes.

Just before dawn I took her home. She said she preferred watching our departure on the view-screen, so the children could be with her.

Except for the monotony, our trip through space was uneventful. In one day less than the anticipated time we were within the sun system of the gods; ten hours later our sphere plunged toward the planet.

Our excitement mounted as we watched the green globe on the landing visor. Point magnification showed us a wonderful, fertile countryside spread with forests and fields, and dotted by blue lakes. The technology of the gods far exceeded ours, for nowhere had the bulk of a city been reared to mar the beauty of their world. We saw occasional sections of highway curling gracefully, like silk ribbons, among the trees. It was obvious (so we thought then) that their cities, concealed underground, would be close to a place where several of the roads joined. Near such a junction we set the space sphere down in a broad valley rimmed by low hills.

We did not believe it would be necessary to wear the regulation landing helmets, but we tested the atmosphere to be sure and found it similar to our own. How could it have been otherwise? We were a colony established by these people; we would naturally be like them in the chemistry of our bodies.

We turned up the landing port and descended to the ground. The air smelled fresh and unbelievably clean, like a city park after a spring rain.

I had expected that we would be met as soon as we landed; and I was subtly frightened when we saw no one. After a while we walked to the confluence of highways near by. The white roads were cracked and broken, overgrown with plant life. We all knew the truth even then, yet no one had the courage to say it.

We followed the highway for a little while until we came to a place where the surrounding ground was a mass of jagged masonry overgrown with moss and grass. Two of us had the heart to dig out one of the larger pieces of shattered granite. On it were symbols that we knew, a word from the tongue of the ancients.

There was no doubt after that. Silently we turned back.

As we approached our space sphere a group of fierce beasts sprang at us, throwing long, pointed sticks which they apparently used as weapons. They were disgusting to look at because they were like caricatures of ourselves: thin, white, hairless, naked things who walked almost erect and used their forepaws like arms. To scare them off we shot our flair guns into the air. They were terrified, but instead of scurrying back into the forest they flung themselves at our feet, crying piteously.

We had no idea how many of them might be concealed in the woods; by sheer weight of numbers they could overwhelm us. We pushed through them and made haste to enter the sphere.

I looked back just before we fired the take-off. The beasts were pouring into the field from all sides, prostrating themselves at intervals, raising their ugly, hairless paws toward us. It was such a mockery of a human gesture that it sickened me. I was glad when the flame of our exhaust burst over them and I could see them no longer.

We remained on the planet for almost a week, and we made numerous landings wherever we thought we might find people. But everywhere it was the same. The cities were scattered ruins, some utterly deserted, others inhabited only by the hairless, white beasts.

There was a possibility, of course, that our scientists had miscalculated. With some hope, we went to the other planets in the system. We found nothing, not even the dust of broken cities.

Thus, the home of the gods.

It has all been told before. The shock is gone, but the smashed dream of centuries cannot be healed.

I had to carry some comfort to Alyria, some new reason for hope, and there was nothing. I could invent nothing. She is a dreamer, a Keeper of the Legend; I am a technician. I can go on building; I can design more efficient power units, faster space spheres; I can help plant new colonies on the unexplored planets. I can pretend my work has meaning; I can pretend I have a reason and a purpose for what I do.

But what of Alyria? My soul is in the dexterity of my hand and brain; hers, in the elusive magnificence of the Legend. She had the vision, the insight into meaning and cause, the ultimate understanding of absolute truth. And in a breath it was taken from her. She had nothing, and she cannot delude herself with pretense.

Is it any wonder that I took the surface tube home after we had landed? That I left it a block short of our dwelling unit and walked the rest of the way, wracking my brain frantically for some shadow of consolation I could take her?

Mechanically I shut the door of the vacuum-vertishaft and set the dial for the third level, fifty-three. Alyria was waiting at the door. And she was smiling!

"I allowed the children to stay up past their bedtime so they could eat with us," she said. But instead of letting me go into the house, she put her arm around me and drew me into the little garden at the back. Beyond the plastic guard-rail we could see the pattern of city lights at our feet, as we had two years before, and overhead the eternal rooftop of space.

"I hope you're ready to talk yourself hoarse?" Alyria asked.

"If you like, but it might be easier for you if . . ."

"The children have a thousand questions. As far as they're concerned, you've had an incredibly exciting adventure. I do hope you had at least one narrow escape. They've invented such wonderful stories; you'll have to live up to some of them."

I kissed her then; I was proud of her. No Keeper of the Legend could have suffered more than she had, and none could have maintained her poise. She drew me down on the garden seat beside her.

"At first it was very hard," she whispered. "Sometimes at night I would come out here and look up at the stars. There was one terrible question pounding in my mind, and I never found an answer. What had happened to the gods who gave us our beginning? What did the Legend really mean? Had they destroyed themselves? But that was impossible; they were too wise to fall into discord. Had another race attacked them? Then what had become of it, and why had we been spared? Or perhaps the hairless things you found in the ruins had conquered them? But that was the most fantastic notion of them all! There is no answer; perhaps there were no gods. I was utterly lost and depressed, until I began to listen to the stories the children were inventing for themselves. None of it had meaning to them, except as an adventure. Slowly they taught me the truth. The past is a pretty story, but we cannot turn back to it. The future is ours. We can make what we like of it. We are gods in our own right!"

She looked at me and I saw the light of the stars was in her eyes again.

"The people of the earth are gone," she said. "We do not know what happened to them, and it hardly matters. The earth-people were men like ourselves, not gods. We possess what the earth has lost, and perhaps something they never found."

She put both her arms around me and clung to me tenderly; she was no dreamer then, no visionary, no Keeper of the Legend, but a woman. Her arm lay beside mine in the moonlight, its long, sleek, green hair as downy as air. It was a fascinating contrast to the bristling stubble that covered my own purple skin. I wondered, as I kissed her again, what our next child would be like. The others are all so different! Alyria and I are like any parents; we think the baby is the prettiest of the lot. He is covered with that thick, marbled hair, so rare these days.

The men at the space port tell me I have all the luck.



Arthur C. Clarke's brilliant exposition on the building of the space-station, THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE, has caused such a stir that many people have forgotten that the English writer can also create convincing, spine-tingling fiction. We think THE FORGOTTEN ENEMY is as fine a tale as has flowed from his prolific pen.

The Forgotten Enemy

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE THICK furs thudded softly to the ground as Professor Millward jerked himself upright on the narrow bed. This time, he was sure, it had been no dream: the freezing air that rasped against his lungs still seemed to echo with the sound that had come crashing out of the night.

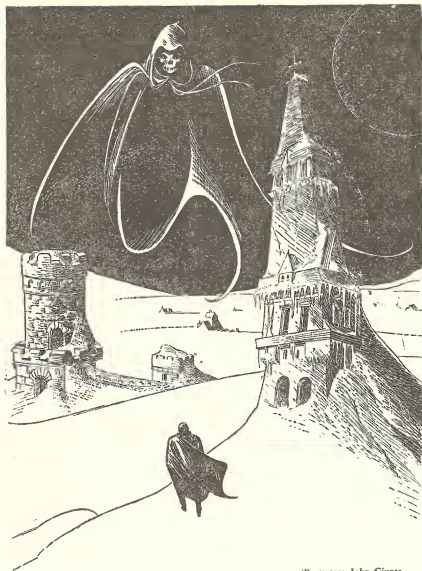
He gathered his furs around him and listened intently. All was quiet again: from the narrow windows on the western walls long shafts of moonlight played upon the endless rows of books, as they played upon the dead city beneath. The world was utterly still; even in the old days the city would have been silent on such a night, and it was doubly silent now.

Still dazed with sleep, Professor Millward shuffled out of bed, and doled a few lumps of coke into the glowing brazier. Then he made his way slowly towards the nearest window, pausing now and then to rest his hand lovingly on the volumes he had guarded all these years.

He shielded his eyes from the brilliant moonlight and peered out into the night. The sky was cloudless: the sound he had heard had not been thunder, whatever it might have been. It had come from the north, and, even as he waited, it came again.

Distance had softened it, distance and the bulk of the hills that lay beyond London. It did not race across the sky like thunder, but seemed to come from a single point far to the north. It was like no natural sound that Professor Millward had ever heard, and for a moment he dared to hope again.

Only Man, he was sure, could have made such a sound. Perhaps the dream that had kept him here among these treasures of civilization for more than twenty years would soon be a dream no longer. Men were returning to England, blasting their way through the ice and snow with the weapons which science had given them before the coming of the Dust.



illustrator: John Giunta

It was strange that they should come by land, and from the North, but he thrust aside any thoughts that might quench the newly kindled flame of hope.

Three hundred feet below, the broken sea of snow-covered roofs lay bathed in the bitter moonlight. Miles away the tall stacks of Battersea Power Station glimmered like thin white ghosts beneath the night sky. Now that the dome of St. Paul's had collapsed beneath the weight of snow, they alone challenged his supremacy.

Professor Millward walked slowly back along the bookshelves, thinking over the plan that had formed in his mind. Twenty years ago he had watched the last helicopters climbing heavily out of Regent's Park, their rotors churning the ceaselessly falling snow. Even then, when the silence had closed around him, he could not bring himself to believe that the North had been abandoned forever. Yet already he had waited a whole generation, among the books to which he had dedicated his life.

In those early days he had sometimes heard, over the radio which was his only contact with the South, of the struggle to colonize the now temperate lands of the Equator. He did not know the outcome of that far-off battle, fought with desperate skill in the dying jungles and across deserts that had already felt the first touch of snow. Perhaps it had failed: the radio had been silent now for fifteen years or more. Yet if men and machines were indeed returning from the North—of all directions—he might again be able to hear their voices as they spoke to one another and to the lands from which they had come.

Professor Millward left the university building perhaps a dozen times a year, and then only through sheer necessity. Over the past two decades he had collected everything he needed from the shops in the Bloomsbury area, for in the final exodus vast supplies of stock had been left behind through lack of transport. In many ways, indeed, his life could be called luxurious: certainly no professor of English literature had ever been clothed with such expensive garments as those he had taken from an Oxford Street furrier's.

The sun was blazing from a cloudless sky as he shouldered his pack and unlocked the massive gates. Up to ten years ago packs of starving dogs had hunted in this area, and though he had seen none for years he was still cautious and always carried a revolver when he went into the open.

The sunlight was so brilliant that the reflected glare hurt his eyes; but it was almost wholly lacking in heat. Although the belt of cosmic dust through which the planets were now passing had made little visible difference to the Sun's brightness, it had robbed it of all strength. No one knew whether the world would swim out into the warmth again in ten or a

thousand years, and civilization had fled southwards in search of lands where the word "summer" was not an empty mockery.

The latest drifts had packed hard and Professor Millward had little difficulty in making the journey to Tottenham Court Road. Sometimes it had taken him hours of floundering through the snow and one year he had been sealed in his great concrete watch-tower for nine months on end.

He kept away from the houses with their dangerous burdens of snow and their hanging icicles, and went north a hundred yards until he found the shop he was seeking. The words above the shattered windows were still bright and clear: "Thos. Jenkins & Sons. Radio and Electrical. Television a Specialty."

Some snow had drifted through a broken section of roofing, but the little upstairs room had not altered since his last visit a dozen years ago. The short-wave radio still stood on the table, and the empty tins scattered on the floor spoke mutely of the lonely hours he had spent here before all hope had died. He wondered if he must go through the same ordeal again.

Professor Millward brushed the snow from the copy of *The Amateur Radio Handbook for 1955*, which had taught him what little he knew about wireless. The test-meters and batteries were still lying in their half-remembered places, and to his relief some of the batteries still held their charge. He searched through the stock until he had built up the necessary power supplies, and checked the radio as well as he could. Then he was ready.

It was a pity he could never send the manufacturers the testimonial they deserved. The faint "hiss" from the speaker brought back memories of the B.B.C., of the nine o'clock news and symphony concerts, of all the things he had once taken for granted in a world that was now gone like a dream. With scarcely controlled impatience he tuned across the wavebands, but everywhere there was nothing except that scarcely audible hiss. It was disappointing, but no more: he remembered that the real test would come at night. In the meantime he would forage among the surrounding shops for anything that might be useful.

It was dusk when he returned to the little room. A hundred miles above his head, tenuous and invisible, the Heaviside Layer would be expanding outwards towards the stars as the sun went down. So it had done every evening for millions of years, and for a half century only Man had used it for his own purposes, to reflect around the world his messages of hate or peace, to echo with trivialities or to sound with the music that had once been called immortal.

Slowly, with infinite patience, Professor Millward began to search the wavebands that a generation ago had been a babel of shouting voices and stabbing Morse. Even as he listened, the faint hope he had dared to

cherish began to fade within him. The city itself was no more silent than the once crowded oceans of ether. Only the faint crackle of thunderstorms half the world away broke the intolerable stillness. Man had abandoned his latest conquest.

Soon after midnight the batteries faded out. Professor Millward did not have the heart to search for more, but curled up in his furs and fell into a troubled sleep. He got what consolation he could from the knowledge that, if he had not proved his theory, neither had he disproved it.

The heatless sunlight was flooding the lonely white road when he began the homeward journey. He was very tired, for he had slept little and his sleep had been broken by the recurring fantasy of rescue.

The silence was suddenly broken by the distant thunder that came rolling over the white roofs. It came—there could be no doubt now—from beyond the northern hills that had once been London's playground. From the buildings on either side, little avalanches of snow went swishing out into the wide street: then the silence returned.

Professor Millward stood motionless—weighing, considering, analyzing. The sound had been too long-drawn to be an ordinary explosion. Perhaps—or was he dreaming again?—it was nothing less than the distant thunder of an atomic bomb, burning and blasting away the snow a million tons at a time, and bringing life instead of death. His hopes revived, and the disappointments of the night began to fade.

That momentary pause almost cost him his life. Out of a side street, something huge and white moved suddenly into his field of vision. For a moment his mind refused to accept the reality of what he saw: then the paralysis left him and he fumbled desperately for his futile revolver. Paddling towards him across the snow, swinging its head from side to side with a hypnotic, serpentine motion, was a polar bear.

He dropped his belongings and ran, floundering over the snow towards the nearest buildings. Providentially, the Underground entrance was only fifty feet away. The steel grille was closed, but he remembered breaking the lock many years ago. The temptation to look back was almost intolerable, for he could hear nothing to tell how near his pursuer was.

For one frightful moment the iron lattice resisted his numbed fingers. Then it yielded reluctantly and he forced his way through the narrow opening.

Out of his childhood there came a sudden, incongruous memory of an albino ferret he had once seen weaving its body ceaselessly across the wire netting of its cage. There was the same reptile grace in the monstrous shape, twice as high as a man, that reared itself in baffled fury against the grille. The metal bowed but did not yield beneath the pressure: then the bear dropped to the ground, grunted softly and padded away. It slashed

once or twice at the fallen haversack, scattering a few tins of food into the snow, and vanished as silently as it had come.

A very shaken Professor Millward reached the University three hours later, after moving in short spurts from one refuge to the next. After all these years, he was no longer alone in the city. He wondered if there were other visitors, and that same night he knew the answer. Just before dawn he heard, quite distinctly, the cry of a wolf from somewhere in the direction of Hyde Park.

By the end of the week he knew that the animals of the North were on the move. Once he saw a reindeer running southward, pursued by a pack of silent wolves, and sometimes in the night there were sounds of deadly conflict. He was amazed that so much life had managed to exist in the white wilderness between London and the Pole. Now something was driving it southward, and the knowledge brought him a mounting excitement. He did not believe that these fierce survivors would flee from anything save Man.

The strain of waiting was beginning to affect Professor Millward's mind, and for hours he would sit in the cold sunlight, his furs wrapped around him, dreaming of rescue and thinking of the ways in which men might be returning to England. Perhaps an expedition had come from North America across the Atlantic ice: it might have been years upon its way. But why had it come so far north? His favorite theory was that the Atlantic ice packs were not thick enough for heavy traffic farther to the south.

One thing, however, he could not explain to his satisfaction. There had been no air reconnaissance, and it was hard to believe that the art of flight had been lost in so short a time.

Occasionally he would walk along the ranks of books, whispering now and then to a well-loved volume. There were books here that he had not dared to open for years, they reminded him so poignantly of the past. But now, as the days grew longer and brighter, he would sometimes take down a volume of poetry and reread his old favorites. Then he would go to the tall windows and shout the magic words over the rooftops, as if they would break the spell that had gripped the world.

It was warmer now, as if the ghosts of lost summers had returned to haunt the land. For whole days the temperature rose above freezing, while in many places flowers were breaking through the snow. Whatever was approaching from the North was nearer, and several times a day that enigmatic roar would go thundering over the city, sending the snow sliding upon a thousand roofs. There were strange, grinding undertones that Professor Millward found baffling and even ominous. At times it was almost as if he were listening to the clash of mighty armies, and some-

times a mad and dreadful thought came into his mind and would not be dismissed. Often he would wake in the night and imagine that he heard the sound of mountains moving to the sea.

So the summer wore away, and as the sound of that distant battle drew steadily nearer, Professor Millward was the prey of ever more violently alternating hopes and fears. Although he saw no more wolves or bears—they seemed to have fled southward—he did not risk leaving the safety of his fortress. Every morning he would climb to the highest window of the tower and search the northern horizon with field-glasses. But all he ever saw was the stubborn retreat of the snows above Hampstead, as they fought their bitter rearguard action against the sun.

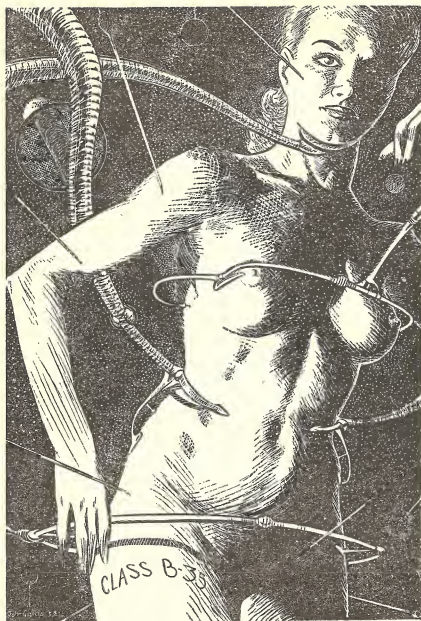
His vigil ended with the last days of the brief summer. The grinding thunder in the night had been nearer than ever before, but there was still nothing to hint at its real distance from the city. Professor Millward felt no premonition as he climbed to the narrow window and raised his binoculars to the northern sky.

As a watcher from the walls of some threatened fortress might have seen the sunlight glinting on the first spears of an advancing army, so in that moment Professor Millward knew the truth. The air was crystal clear, and the hills were sharp and brilliant against the cold blue of the sky. They had lost almost all their snow: once he would have rejoiced at that, but it meant nothing now.

Overnight, the enemy he had forgotten had conquered the last defenses and was preparing for the final onslaught. As he saw that deadly glitter along the crest of the doomed hills, Professor Millward understood at last the sound he had heard advancing for so many months. It was little wonder that he had dreamed of mountains on the march.

Out of the north, their ancient home, returning in triumph to the lands they had once possessed, the glaciers had come again.





In the best of his stories, Bryce Walton says, he attempts to portray a world that begins where George Orwell's "1984" leaves off. The world of THE AGENTS is a study in contrasts between the hickory smoke world of the mountaineer and the surgical steel world of the futuristic city, just a fast jet trip apart. That the contrasting elements are made believable and thoroughly fascinating is the proof of Bryce Walton's mastery of his art!

The Agents

illustrator: John Giunta

by BRYCE WALTON

GEORGE EYCK was drowsing on the front porch of his cabin that summer afternoon when the Agent came out to the hills. He could hear Lara singing from inside the cabin:

"Oh, they won't get us back to the City,
To the stamp and the tread of machine,
Where the chrome and the cars are too pretty,
And life is a meaningless dream . . ."

Lara was the only thing George knew to be prettier than her voice. Everyone said she had the sweetest voice in the hills.

Then she stopped singing. George swung his hobnailed boots to the floor, and eased his long, lean, tanned length up out of the rawhide-thonged chair. Suddenly he was wide awake, listening. The fiery whoosshing sound, crashing of small trees, then smoke drifting.

A jet. A citizen. A peculiar coolness slid along his spine, then he swung around, went inside and picked up his rifle. Lara, wearing only a pair of shorts which was about all most women wore in the hills in summer, touched his arm. Her eyes, which George thought were the clearest, sweetest blue he'd ever seen, were wide. She was young and so full of exuberance and life, not quiet like George. She was almost as tall as he was, slim and like a strong new tower of stone.

"What could a citizen be doing here?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"Be careful, George. With the gun I mean. You hate the cities so, and yet they've never bothered us. So don't do anything wild or crazy. . . ."

"You stay in here," George said, "until I find out what's up."

He stood on the porch, the rifle resting in the cradle of his left arm. The citizen came carefully out of the spruce trees lining the clearing and walked briskly toward the porch steps. He had on one of those translucent plastic suits and shiny black plastic boots that came halfway to his knees. When he got nearer, George saw that he wore an antiseptic transparent face sheath, like the city folks when they came into the country. It gave his face a white, unreal look. He carried a black case.

He looked up. "I understand you have a Talent up here, Mr. Eyck."

"A what?" George said. It had been years since he'd seen a citizen. But he knew about them. The citizen looked at the cabin door, at the windows.

"I track down Talent," he said. "And I understand, George, you have singing Talent up here."

George wished later that he had killed the citizen while he stood there, just eased the rifle down a little and shot him through the head.

"Talent's rare thing," the citizen said. "Goes to waste up here."

"I guess it doesn't," George said. "Lara sings for the folks around here, and for me and herself. Guess you wouldn't call that wasting it."

"Millions and millions of people would benefit from the Talent in the city, George. Entertainment's different in the city. People *need* Talents there, and I'm prepared to make it well worth a Talent's while."

George heard the Agent talk on about what a wonderful life an entertainer led in the city, and he started to tell the Agent to get out and never come back, and then he heard Lara's voice. Her song coming out of the cabin.

The Agent listened. George's fingers quivered a little on the rifle, and he felt a sickness in his stomach. Her singing grew louder, clearer. He'd never heard her sing this way before. He turned quickly. She came out onto the porch, singing. She'd put on that bright-colored shawl that she had woven herself.

The sickness spread through him. He couldn't understand it. But he knew what was happening. She was singing—for the Agent. The Agent slipped past George and onto the porch. She stopped singing then and her face was flushed, her lips slightly parted, and her strong white teeth shone.

The Agent said, "You're a real Talent. I'm trained to know that. I've got a contract here to sign. Five thousand a week for as long as you want to entertain. And the honorary title of Worker's Artist. Your Talent is exceptional. I can promise that you'll be among the top few in popularity. You'll have one of the most luxuriant apartments available, every convenience. People will worship you. Entertainers are the most important people in the city. You can be one of them. . . ."

George let the rifle sag, then he put it down. He felt afraid, confused,

sick. The rage boiled under all the other emotions, made worse by helplessness. It wasn't what the Agent was saying. She had been ready for it. He looked at her as though he'd never seen her before. She seemed like a stranger. She was interested, very interested. All this time they had seemed so much together, sharing everything, ideas, likes, dislikes, and now suddenly she was showing something she had never even hinted at before. Her eyes sparkled. Her face was flushed with excitement. Only a few times had he ever known of anyone getting the city urge. But it was too much of a shock that Lara would have that secret longing.

But it seemed that that was the way of it. George wanted to say something. But there was nothing he could say or do. It was up to Lara. She looked at him, and there wasn't even any apology there. The excitement of the moment was so great she seemed to have forgotten him, the hills, everything he'd ever told her.

Her folks were plains people. They contacted the city folks a lot more than hill people did. Maybe that made the difference. That, and this special talent of hers.

SHE CAME over and held onto George's hand. George listened to the Agent talk. He talked about the glamorous life, the adulation, the color, wealth and fame, and the fact that millions would benefit from her special gifts.

Lara said, "I . . . don't know. I never dreamed my voice was . . . anything like that. George . . . what do you think?"

The words didn't come out very well. "You know what I think. I've told you enough times what I think of the cities. I thought you saw it that way."

But she hadn't, that was clear. Maybe someone born in the hills, certain kinds, couldn't realize what freedom was, self-respect, individuality . . . until they lost them. Trouble was that then—so many times—it was too late. But she'd seemed to understand when he'd told her about the revolt and the exodus to the country.

But he had no right to prevent her from accepting the Agent's offer. She had the right to make her own choice. In the hills, the individual was respected. It hurt him to condone her signing of the contract. But he was glad that she insisted that the contract include George. George was to be with her all the time; that is, if he wanted to. And he wanted to. As much as he hated the city, he wanted to. He might be able to help her later if she saw things true.

The Agent agreed to this. George could stay with Lara as long as he liked.

George knew he couldn't take the rifle. But he wanted something, some kind of a weapon. He got the staghorn-handled bowie knife and put it

under his shirt beneath his belt. As primitive and ineffectual as it might be in the city, it gave him a small feeling of security.

Lara put on a plain gingham dress. But the Agent had one of those translucent suits for her and she put it on. Her body was slim and strong and straight. George wore rough homespuns and the Agent also offered him a suit. George told him to go to hell.

When the jet took off, George's insides felt as if they were coming out and he got very sick. He'd never ridden in a jet before. Under them, the flames shot out white and roaring and the forest smoked. The Agent dropped an extinguisher bomb or the whole forest would have burned.

GEORGE felt more than merely uneasy in the big shiny apartment in which the Agent left them. There was every convenience. One pushed buttons to get almost anything, including the big television screen that covered one entire wall. George had never seen television before. It didn't seem to mean much to him, but Lara stared at it in a kind of fascinated daze.

The Agent had said he would be back later with a couple of sponsors for an audition, sometime around noon.

Lara was in a trance, like a kid caught in its own dream. She stared in wonderment at everything. She seemed carried away by the city, its looping silver cables upon which small bubble cars dipped and soared like drops of water. They had a view of the city. It had a hard, bright metallic shine that hurt George's eyes and made his head ache.

And then people started coming in.

They kept coming in and going out, an endless crowd, always laughing, joking, playing parlor games, everyone introducing everyone else, shaking hands, chattering. They were enthusiastic about George and Lara Eyck, their new neighbors. Though they were always introducing each other, everyone acted as though they were old friends. Everybody seemed to love everyone else even though they had just met.

But none of it meant anything to George. It wasn't anything that had meaning. It couldn't have. He stayed out of it as much as possible. He felt awkward, embarrassed, and alone. With George, friendship was something that developed after a long time, after knowing someone deeply and well.

He didn't remember their names, but there were always more and more people. No one could be alone. It seemed to be unhealthy. And Lara was in with them, laughing, shaking hands, glowing with excitement. George stood against the wall and watched.

They talked a lot, but about only a few and always the same things; about each other's appearance, and about teleshows and entertainers;

about some latest clothing style or gossip or something, always about some favorite star, some actress, or actor, a dancer or singer.

"I'm trying out Felix Rand's face this week," one of the men said. "My wife saw him three days ago and fell in love with him at once. All she's talked about for three days is Rand! So I'm going to try his face, see how it looks on me. But before I agreed to try Rand's face, I made Gloria promise to try out Myra Throne's body for a while. She sends me."

"You mean your wife sends you?"

"No! Myra Throne!"

Laughter.

One of the women seemed to notice George's clothes. Her eyes widened. "What odd make-up! Who are you being today?"

"Myself," George said.

Everybody laughed.

No one was ever alone. And none of them, George thought, is himself, and maybe they never were themselves. They spent all their time being like someone else, someone in the dream world of the screen.

Lara came dancing over and kissed him. Her cheeks were flushed. "George, don't brood. I'm just having fun, just taking it all in. It doesn't mean anything. It's fun maybe for a while, but I can see that it would get boring after a while."

"Maybe," George said.

She kissed him again. "It's just my singing that's important to me, George. That made me do this. I never seemed to be complete out in the hills and it's because I couldn't sing for enough people."

"Maybe it would be better for all these people if no one sang to them any more."

She didn't seem to have heard what he said. "It's terrible, George, your having to come here just because of me. If you don't want to stay . . ."

"I want to stay here as long as I can," George said. "As long as I can take all this, I'll stay."

The Agent came in. He didn't appear to notice George. He told all the guests to leave. Lara went over to a wall and looked into it at her face, and started trying to fix her face again.

"Forget that, Mrs. Eyck. We'll take care of the alterations."

The television screen played out the end of a story about a woman and a man who finally found one another after fifty years, but on the screen they were just as young as when they had started the search. They were beautiful. But then George was listening to the Agent.

"They'll be here to audition you in a minute," the Agent said.

"But I—I look so awful," Lara said. "Not like those women who've been in here, or those on the screen. I should do something . . ."

"No," the Agent said. "Surface isn't important right now. It's the Talent. People will react to that, though they never understand it. Our Agents have been trained to spot it at once. We have two prospective sponsors coming in. They've not been trained to spot Talent like we have, raw talent that is, but they take our word for it. When we say we've got a Talent, they know we're right. Results over many years have assured them of our infallibility."

"But surely the way I look . . ."

"Means nothing now. Surface stuff. We can fix all that."

"She looks fine to me," George said, "just the way she is."

The Agent didn't look at George. But he answered him.

"BUT YOURS is a highly personalized taste. We build up a Talent so that some big section of the public can identify with it. That's the purpose of a Talent. First we get the raw artistic stuff, like Lara. Then we fit the outside of it into the concept of a certain section of the public taste, you see. Maybe you don't. Doesn't matter. The old-time Agents had the wrong approach. They tried to make a Talent appeal to everyone a little bit; we've learned that's wrong. We create highly specialized Talent, to appeal to what we call a certain reaction field sector of the public. Instead of having a Talent that appeals to everyone a little, we develop a highly specialized Talent that hits a certain field sector of the public very hard, with whom they can most thoroughly identify. It makes for greater control, and consequently more happiness, and adjustment and conformity."

The Agent went on. "Oh, we've learned, George. Different classes, subdivisions, minority groups, they all demand differences in entertainment in order to get the highest possible identification and projection. And we've got it all charted and measured. We know exactly how to build a Talent up for whatever group we need a Talent for. People all identify with something higher, more beautiful, of course unobtainable. Something beyond life. And now, in *real* life, no one ever causes any trouble."

Two sponsors came in. They were dressed like the Agent except that their suits were a light-blue color. They seemed a little older, their faces pale, their hair graying. They sat on a special couch that came out of the wall and adjusted itself to their bodies. The Agent greeted them formally and suggested to Lara that she step into the center of the room and display her Talent.

Music started from somewhere and George recognized the music as an accompaniment for two of Lara's favorite songs. The television screen went blank for the first time.

For a minute, listening to her sing again, George could hear nothing else, and see nothing else. For that minute he forgot where he was, and he

forgot about the Agent and the sponsors, and the visitors, and that inexplicable something that had chopped off the meaningful life they had known together and which he somehow thought would always go on.

He didn't see the oddly twisted angles and structural furniture with its cold metallic tone dangling from the ceiling by silver wire, or the glass walls and the looping, gleaming, eye-burning metal of the city outside.

George heard Lara and around her he saw the soft leaves of the green country, the quiet motion of ferns in the shade. He heard birds singing with her and flowers blooming round her.

When she finished singing, the Agent turned to the sponsors who stood up. One of them said casually: "Sounds as though it's a Talent all right. But . . ."

"Oh of course there'll have to be a lot of alterations," the Agent said. "I'm not sure, but I think she's a class B-35 type. And that's why I called you two in. There's going to be a spot open tomorrow for a Class B-35 type and this Talent's ready to be shaped in to this spot."

"Fine. When will we preview it?"

"Soon as she's coached and shaped," the Agent said. "Tomorrow night."

"That's fine." The two sponsors left.

George went with them over to start getting Lara in shape for the preview.

HE REMEMBERED later a big room, the walls all mirrors except one wall. And he remembered Lara standing nude on a rotating cylinder in the middle of the room. The cylinder kept turning slowly and the two men sat watching her. The Agent stood to one side. George stood in the corner watching. They moved in cameras, lights, microphones. On the opposite wall from the two men was a large screen, covered with squares, and as Lara rotated, the metal arms drew lines, graphs, diagrams, measurements and figures on the big screen. At the top of the screen was "CLASS B-35" in big letters.

The men kept making notations on pads and one of them was holding up something which he kept sighting through and adjusting like binoculars.

"You may step down and put on your suit, Mrs. Eyck."

She seemed a little frightened now, and so alone, in front of all the mirrors, George thought. But he couldn't tell. It was so hard to form an opinion about how she looked or felt now. His confidence had been broken.

He heard one of them say: "She's definitely a Class B-35 type. But there's got to be a lot of alterations."

The other said: "She's basically a Marian Richman within the B-35 graph."

Lara had moved over and was looking at herself in one of the mirrored walls. The Agent took hold of her arm. "If you'll come with me, Mrs. Eyck, please."

A panel slid open. Through it, George could see a white hall, tubular, shining white metal that disappeared around a far turn somewhere. He started after her. The Agent said: "You can't come into the wards, George."

"But the contract says I can be with her all the time."

"Sorry, but it's a law that only authorized persons can come into the wards. It's understood in a contract that the laws will be adhered to."

George remembered so clearly the way she looked standing there behind the Agent in the center of a white tube that went away winding seemingly into nowhere. He remembered down to the smallest detail how small and far-away she seemed. The tunnel distorted, so that she kept seeming smaller and smaller and farther away all the time.

Lara seemed to know how George felt. He still didn't say anything, but she saw it in his face and his eyes. For a moment she seemed almost on the verge of coming back through the door, past the Agent. But then she shook her head in a kind of daze, and the panel slid shut.

George looked at the blank panel and whispered. "You're fine, fine, Lara—just the way you are."

A man in a brown, tight-fitting uniform of a dark-brown shade came up noiselessly and said: "There's a room over here where you are to wait, Mr. Eyck."

It was a small room with a telescreen covering one wall, but George managed to ignore the entertainment. He kept imagining Lara being on that screen, and somehow that made it easier to ignore the screen altogether. And later, it couldn't have been much later, he heard Lara's voice.

He got up and saw her standing in the doorway of the room. Behind he saw the Agent.

She took a few steps into the room. Her face had an odd uncertain look, maybe a stunned look, George thought. He couldn't quite understand what kind of an expression it was. It seemed partly sad. She seemed to be trying to smile, but it didn't quite manage to be a smile. There was something different about her too, but he couldn't tell what it was.

She said: "I guess I'll be here for the rest of the day, darling. You don't have to wait here for me. There are so many things you could be doing. . . ."

George was trying to see what the difference was. Fear was flickering inside him like an uneasy flame. And then he knew why. He wanted to

see what was different, and he was afraid to find out what it was.

She walked nearer, and he went toward her. She was shaking her head then and her eyes were closed, her face twisted. She was whispering. "George . . . darling . . . I wish I'd never sang . . . I wish I couldn't sing . . . I wish the music didn't come up in me and drive me away from you . . . I wish I had only you . . . George . . . I'm afraid. . ."

Then he was standing close to her and that was how he knew. The pain suddenly was in his throat like a hot cauter. His stomach twitched. She had been almost as tall as he was. Now she wasn't that tall. She was shorter—a lot shorter. . . .

He heard the sound burst from his own lips. He threw her aside and he had the Agent in his hands, and he had him pinned to the wall. He knew then how he hated the Agent, how he really felt about him and what he stood for, and what he meant, not only in the city, but wherever there were human beings.

Then hands dragged George away from the Agent. Big men in tight-fitting dark brown uniforms. They held him helpless until he stopped struggling.

THE AGENT SAID: "George, the Class B-35 public sector demands shorter women, that's all. We have to hit maximum appeal, and she just had to be shorter. I could have shown you that on the charts. What difference does it make? She's more appealing, more satisfying now, for our purposes, and it'll mean more success for her too."

George tried to break free.

The Agent said: "The contract says you can stay with her in the city, but not that you can act this way. You'll have to be confined to your apartment for a while unless you can promise not to cause trouble. You should consider her more, George; after all, think what a big thing this is. You should make it easier, not more difficult. She's got to be free of tension, thoroughly at ease. The public catches things like that. The wrong attitude, nervous tension, things of that sort, they can kill a Talent."

The fear came up and flowed all over George like sudden rain. Lara's face blurred, and the Agent's face twisted at a distorted angle. He thought: ". . . it's impossible to say now what she thinks, what she wants, how much they've influenced her somehow there in the wards. . . ."

He'd have to be careful. He couldn't fly off like that any more. He tried to loosen tense muscles, drive down the boiling hate, the desperate rage that kept pushing up toward his head like some sort of blindness.

He'd have to stay with her. It didn't do any good to stay here necessarily, but he had to be comparatively free as a person if an opportunity came up that would allow him to act at all. He managed to say, "I'll be all right

now. It was just a shock. Seeing her go in there and come out in a few minutes . . . a . . . foot shorter. . . ."

"Well, George, you're just not used to our way of handling things here. In the Wards, we can do anything to make a Talent realize its full maximum entertainment potential. She spent only a few minutes in the biochemistry ward. And you see, she's a foot shorter. Cut off the legs, reshape them a little, quick surgery and the healing lamps. Over in a minute, no trouble, and look what an improvement."

George kept his hand firmly against the wall. He felt his face twitch.

"She has to go to another Ward," the Agent said. "You want to wait here?"

"No," George whispered. He had to get alone somewhere, where he could think, figure something.

"You can visit a neuro-show, George. That's something like television, only it's really more effective. Tridimensional, you're right in it. Much better identification. But only a certain small percentage of the public can accept it, yet. Too obvious, the psyche boys say. Second thought, I don't think you'd go for it."

One of the uniformed men took him back and left him off at the apartment. Everything worked by a rigid system. He knew the buttons to press, the car numbers, and which way to get out of the city, if the time ever came.

Guests started coming in at once. He wanted to drive them out, but then found out that he could blot them out of his mind and eye if he concentrated on it.

He could figure out only one thing to do. It went against his principles, even now, but it seemed the only way. He'd have to take Lara out of the city whether she agreed to it or not. He figured she wasn't in her right mind. That it wouldn't be the same as forcing someone who knew what was right and wrong to do something against their will. She was influenced somehow, and he thought that if he could get her out of the city, the spell would finally leave her. Then she would be glad.

He felt a little better then, but only for a little while, then the tension started growing. He kept thinking of what would happen to Lara, and that now, right now, he could do nothing.

The laughing, joking, happy people kept drifting in and out. They danced. Most of the time they looked at the television and talked among themselves somehow at the same time. Talking about the stars of this show and that show, and everyone floating in and out of everyone else's apartment. George began to see another thing: that what came out of the screen had no resemblance at all to what was going on in the real world outside of it.

Maybe people believed that the screen was a reflection of reality. Maybe it had gone that far, George didn't know. But he knew that the screen was enough. It was the way people wished things were, and could never really be. And then he understood what the Agent had said about how valuable entertainment was. He knew now how important a Talent was, and why it had to be shaped just right.

Talent supported the city, kept it high up in the sky among the silvery clouds.

After a while, Lara came in.

THERE were ten people in the apartment and Lara opened the door and did a little whirling dance into the room, then stood there. Her eyes were brighter, her teeth whiter, her lips were wide apart in a smile, a broad eager smile, the teeth showing.

Greetings flew around. Someone Lara had never seen before and who said "Lara, darling," was mixing her a drink. "Oh," someone else said. "Lara, you look almost like Marian Richman."

"Why, she does, so she does. How charming, how stunning."

And then George didn't hear any more. A cold kind of knot seemed to tighten around his waist. He closed his eyes, tried to swallow, to shut out the burning sensation in his eyes and throat.

"Darling, they'll see that I'm the most beautiful actress anywhere. They can do anything!"

She wasn't any shorter. But she was a lot different. George walked closer.

"Your eyes are a different color," George whispered.

But they were bright.

He touched her hair. She blinked at him. "New eyes," she smiled. "A different color. My other eyes were wrong."

"Different hair too."

"Yes, darling, and they don't use dye or anything, nothing the old way. The Agent told me. They take off the scalp, and put on another scalp that has the right color hair. Everything has to be just right. . . ."

"You don't sound the same," he whispered. "Your voice . . ."

"They had to alter the pitch slightly. They didn't change the quality or anything. Just the pitch, a little. . . ."

"Your whole face is . . . is different. Your mouth . . ."

She ran over to the mirror. He could see her reflection smiling back at her and at him. He could see the television screen reflected in the mirror and her face was part of it, and then he saw that all the faces in the mirror were smiling just the same.

That was what made all the faces so much alike. They all smiled the

same. All so much alike, the smiles, not just grins, but all with the teeth showing.

She turned and threw her arms around his neck. "Darling, oh, darling, they can do anything! They changed my face so it would be just right. I can't help being a most popular actress now." Her voice kept getting higher and higher, her smile wider. "They changed my face! I frowned sometimes. Sometimes, they said, I looked sad. And so they fixed all that! They fixed everything, George. And now nothing can make me stop smiling. No matter what happens, darling, I'll always smile! Hear me, hear me, darling! I'll always smile. . . ."

And then she started laughing, high and shrill, and the laughter coming out of the still smiling but not laughing mouth . . . it seemed that she might be crying too. But how could you tell, George thought, with the smile cut there so it couldn't go away?

He was looking past her at the window. And all the people, he thought, who will be you, Lara, and all the men who will be in love with you, will all smile too, and they'll all be happy because you're happy and everyone will stay happy now . . . no matter what. No matter what. . . .

"What, darling, what . . . ?"

The visitors were laughing and doing card tricks. He said, "All of you get the hell out of here!"

THEY stared at him. One of them started to laugh, and said, "Who you imitating?"

George hit him. The man coughed and blood ran out of his nose. He rubbed the nose and looked at the blood on his hand and fell to the floor, unconscious. He was still smiling. Even dead, George thought, they'll keep on smiling.

Then they all backed out of the room and into the hall. Their faces were masks of emotion that George had never seen before, a twisted, grotesque mixture of fear and shock and, over it all, smiles.

George picked up the man from the floor and threw him into the hall.

The door closed. Lara was shivering. Then George shivered too because she had put her hands to her face and was crying, but when she looked up at him, tears welling from her eyes, her mouth was smiling, the teeth showing.

She started to run past him but he grabbed her. He hit her on the jaw and as she went limp and started to fall, he caught her and carried her to the mono-cable car outside the window.

He got in the bubble and started to drag her body in with him.

The Agent looked out the window. "Come back in, George. That car won't work now, not for you."

He sat stiffly, feeling numb and lost, not feeling anything else except the sweat making a stream down his throat. He pressed the button then with a slow, futile movement. The car didn't move.

Wearily, he got out of the car and carried Lara back inside and put her on the special couch that adjusted to her body. The door into the hall was open. Uniformed men stood out there, and the visitors George had chased out.

"This is unfortunate, this reaction of yours," the Agent said. "It's because of your upbringing there in the hills of course, but unfortunate just the same. You'll have to be confined to your apartment until further notice, George. Of course, any time you want to leave the city, you may do so."

George pointed to Lara. "Could she leave the city too, anytime, if she wanted to?"

The Agent said: "Yes, if she wanted to." What he really said was, "Yes, but she'll never want to."

"I won't cause any more trouble," George said, and this time he really didn't think he would. A numb despair filled him. "I'd like to see her though, once before I go, I mean as an entertainer."

"You'll have to be at the preview then," the Agent said. "Promise you won't make a scene, George?"

"I promise," George said.

"I really don't see why you react so unpleasantly, George. After all, she's a Talent. Not many have Talent. I can't understand why you object to her, and all those who will enjoy her so much, benefiting from this Talent."

He waited, but George hardly felt like answering.

"And this alteration, that doesn't call for such an attitude on your part, George. I don't know why you place so much value on certain outward physical appearances. An old romantic idea, doesn't belong any more. Maybe you don't see the psychology of this, George. People are influenced by appearance maybe more than by Talent, though the Talent has to be there. We have to present certain kinds of physical types to get the desired degree of identification. Not only the kind the public prefers, but the kind they *should* want. And of course we determine that."

George looked at Lara.

"Entertainers have to seem perfect, George. By that I mean ultra-mundane, that is, supra-normal. Incomparable, one might say too. You can't depend on a rare thing like a Talent also looking just right, that is . . . looking better than most people. Talent seldom comes equipped by nature with the appearance of a god or goddess. We can't take a rare physically beautiful and godlike human and put Talent into him. We can take Talent and give it the right clothes. You see what it is, George? The one

thing to remember, George, is that when everyone's thoroughly identified with an unreal world, then in the real world they never give anyone any more trouble."

"I'll remember that," George said.

"Entertainers have to be what everyone wants to be," the Agent said, "but can never be."

George said. "I'd like to ask a favor of you."

"Yes, George."

"Until the preview, can the door be fixed so the people can't get in? Can the television screen be blank . . . just until I leave the city?"

"Yes," the Agent said. "For you, yes. The screen has no effect on you anyway, except a negative one. Just press a button if you want anything, George."

FOR A WHILE after the Agent left him alone, George thought about how it would have been to have been born in the city, to have had guests around you all the time and a screen presenting always a dream world far above your own with which you could identify. Always to have been in someone else's apartment, or they in yours.

He would have been the same as the others. He would have been no one.

He was taken to the preview by a brown-suited uniform, deposited in a dark room beside the Agent, and others. He never did know who they were. They were just shadows. They sat in front of a big circle that opened out onto a stage, a colossal stage, blinding in its coloration. It was an outdoor scene, all in bright greens, and flowers blooming all colors, and a sunset beyond hills that spread even more color. A blinding radiance going out into the head and the nerves and the heart.

The perspective was very effective. Looking into an opening having this scene opening out and out as the funnel broadened, like looking out over a thousand miles of riotously blazing colorful countryside.

Dancers came out. Then a man in some kind of tight, bright-white velvety suit. He was tall and broad and he was perfect. And George knew how it was that he was built so beautifully, that he was flawless and why all the dancers were flawless. The man began to sing.

"That's Earl Hammond," the Agent whispered. "He's been one of class B-35's top favorites as a leading romantic type for over ten years. We keep them looking the same of course. And naturally they don't get any older. He'll never have to worry about getting bald. It's a funny thing, George, but many entertainers in the old world used to go mad because they were afraid of losing their hair, and their teeth and things like that."

George watched the stage.

"By the way, George. Her name's been changed. It's Anita Starre now."

George leaned forward. His breath caught in his throat and he felt his hands clenching tightly as her voice sounded, off stage somewhere first, coming out of the phony sunset, out of the false leaves, out of the too-bright flowers. It started away off, came nearer, and got louder and clearer.

The man turned and Lara moved out of the flowers, swirling in a slow-motion dance, and then she stopped and sang directly to the male lead.

"Our sylvan fantasy number," the Agent said. "Always sure to get maximum effect."

There had been other changes. Her breasts were smaller, her shoulders narrower, her hips broader, her legs slimmer, her neck a little longer, her nose was different, and George guessed they had made her arms shorter too.

"George, I'm sure she'll never leave the city now."

"Why?" George said.

"Well, the attitude on the part of an entertainer is important. Any insincerity or negative feeling, well, the public always senses it. And we want the highest positive identification possible. So we had to alter her brain a little too. Didn't think it would be necessary at first, but as it turned out, her attitude wasn't exactly . . . right . . . not thoroughly cooperative that is."

"I didn't think it would be," George said.

"George, she wouldn't even know you now, if she saw you. She wouldn't know what her former name was, I'm afraid."

Everything had seemed finished to George. Hope had gone. Everything was dark and futile. And then suddenly, hearing her sing, he knew that for him it was just beginning. An inward pressure grew in his throat and seemed to swell his arms and hands and join itself in a fluid power.

Lara was gone. There was no one alive anywhere named Lara. She was dead, as surely as though her heart had stopped and they had buried her. Everyone has to die, and so Lara was dead, and the only thing left that was sad about it was that she had died before her time, and that she had died without having a chance to fight for what she had found out, at the last, was right.

GEORGE said, "You're a fool." He whispered it very softly into the Agent's ear. No one behind them. Shadow people on the right and some up in front.

"What?" the Agent whispered.

"Yes," George said, "because you killed Lara, and you killed the Talent too."

"Well—you just listen to that singing and—"

"I have listened. And the Talent isn't there any more. A Talent is part of the whole person, and you've killed her, so the talent's dead too. This person singing there sounds good. But I've listened to your entertainers. She sounds like all the rest of them."

The Agent's face turned a little. "Well, even if it's true, George, it doesn't matter. This is what public class B-35 wants."

George felt good, better than he'd felt in a long time. He knew where he was going, what he had to do. "You go on killing talent and one of these days there won't be any talent left in the cities."

The Agent may not even have known what happened to him. George put the point of the bowie knife against the back of the Agent's neck at the base of the brain and pushed it hard, clear to the hilt, into his neck.

Then he tightened his arm about the Agent's shoulders and arms, holding his arms in tight. He threw one leg over his knees, to keep the Agent's body from jerking too much and attracting attention. Then he let his head back so that the knife supported it there as though the Agent were watching the entertainment.

George got up and walked to the exit and into the hall. He guessed that the Agent had accepted George's statement that he was leaving right after the preview. He had everything ready. The brown-suited citizens were cooperative. They took him out of the city and left him in the forest of the hills. He walked deeper into the forest, and then he sat down and relaxed for a while because he knew now that he was safe. None of them could ever get him. It took a special talent for that.

And after that, life in the hills was different than it had been since the revolt and the exodus. The apathy went, and the lazy contentment and the drifting. George went from settlement to settlement and isolated cabin to cabin and talked a lot. He explained how it wasn't enough for them to just sit out there and wait.

To him, the cities were a disease, a plague, a contagious sickness that might spread. And so now they were not just waiting out there in the hills any more. They were getting ready.

They didn't have much talent born in the cities, George found out. It had all been coming in from the hills to the cities, one from here and one from there. But they stopped that.

And whenever an Agent came out there looking for a Talent, he found a kind of Talent he wasn't looking for.

And few of them ever lived to get back to the city.

Mr. Kowtshook was tall, maybe six feet three. He wore a kind of a cloak affair from his shoulders down to his knees. But he was quite unlike any circus performer who ever made people forget their cares under the Big Top. For with one quiet word he could cure the sick and heal the wounded, and all around him glowed an aura of gentle kindness and unworldly goodness that was as powerful as any weapon invented by man!

Illustrator: Everett Raymond Kinstler

Mr. Kowtshook

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

IT HAPPENED either in '31 or '32; years get mixed up when you're in the circus business and one goddam tour is much like another, but I know the depression had been running for a couple of years. It was no fun keeping the Fattest Lady in the World in oats. Mind you, we were a co-operative bunch and Hester (she was called Hester) took it very well when we had to lay off the cream buns and eclairs, and make it up with pounds of good, healthy, fattening potatoes. We had lost our lion during the winter; the poor old devil was on short rations like the rest of us and a dose of flu carried him right off . . . no strength left.

Everyone pitched in. We all had it in the back of our minds that this was no time for being unemployed, especially in a trade like ours. The boss was Ed Pattenberger; eventually he sold us out . . . the whole lot of us . . . and retired down south to raise turtles, but that was after things had begun to pick up a little. At the time I'm talking of, the circus was the narrow wedge between starving and not starving for him just as much as for the rest, and he worked a sight harder than any laborer I've come across, to keep things going. He sat up four nights running when the elephant got taken bad with an ingrowing toenail.

Yes, we had an elephant. And we had three apes, and four piebald horses, and a couple of small brown bears. Lucy Stoker was the girl who looked after the horses and rode them; a guy called Red Henshaw saw to the other animals . . . the boss exercised them in the ring; he had a way with animals . . . and apart from Hester there were Sue and Sammy the acrobats, Rafe la Follette, the smallest human being, a couple of odd-job men, and me. I was the clown, of course. There was a time when I nearly went to work with Sanger. . . . Anyway, I was glad of the job. We all were.



Late in the summer we put up at a place called Clancey. It's a four- or five-horse town up in the hills—two trains a day and forty miles from anywhere. That was the kind of place we'd gotten down to. There was just that little extra money about in the back of beyond.

This was a Sunday night. It was one of those places where they run you into jail if you do a stroke between 23.59 Saturday and 00.01 Monday, so we didn't have a show on. Practically everybody had gone on into town, and Ed had left me to keep an eye on things. I've got a bad belly for drinks; I'd as soon stay with a good book, always have been that way.

It was a fine evening. Sky was big and red over the hills and going through every shade to purple right overhead. Two or three slices of cloud up above, too, showing half black and half crimson. It was really pretty. I sat on the grass beside the big wagon. I was reading a book by Miss Corelli, I remember. I don't recollect which one it was, but I must have read all her works a half dozen times, and some of them quite a bit more often.

I didn't hear this fellow until he was standing almost over me. He gave me a bit of a shock when I looked up: he was tall, maybe six feet three, and he wore a kind of cloak affair from his shoulders down to his knees. Below that he had ordinary blue-serge trousers, and black shoes.

He said: "This is the circus?"

He had a soft voice, like an Italian singer I used to know when I was in vaudeville, back in 1912.

"Yeah," I said. "This is the circus. But there's no show tonight."

"I'd like a job," he said.

I could have laughed, but wanting a job was no laughing matter in those days. I got up and leaned against the side of the cab.

"I don't run the show," I told him. "But I can tell you there's nothing doing. I'm the clown. If Grock came along and offered to do my job for an extra dollar a week, I'd still be safe."

He said: "My name's Kowtshook."

"Glad to know you," I said. "Mike Bronsenstein."

"I'm an india-rubber man," he said.

"We haven't got one," I admitted. "But it makes no difference."

He took his cloak off. Underneath he was wearing a thin-gray shirt. He started bending. I've seen some things, being with a circus, but he shook me.

In case you don't know, there are two kinds of rubber man. One kind is just double-jointed—he can maybe bend his legs backwards till his feet come round the back of his neck and interlace in front. The other sort's the kind with the funny skin: you pull it and it stays pulled. A doctor once told me it's really some kind of special disease. This fellow wasn't

either of those. He bent at the joints all right, but unless he had joints in a lot more places than I've got he bent at other places as well.

When he'd finished twisting and stretching himself, he said:

"Well?"

"It's good, but we can't afford it."

"Can I wait and see the proprietor?"

"Ed? Sure. It's your time. He'll be back in around an hour. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you."

He sat down on the grass next to where I had been sitting and pulled out a book. He began reading it as though it was interesting. I'm always curious about what folks read. He was reading a dictionary.

Ed came back a bit before the others. He was pretty sober, because none of them could get even half-way drunk on the money we had. He shook his head when he heard what this fellow wanted, but he invited him into his van. I followed. I wanted to see if he was going to bend again, to figure out maybe how he did it.

I couldn't figure it out. Nor could Ed. He shook his head; he had a big head and a thin neck and it always looked dangerous when he waggled it.

"If business were normal I'd hire you like a shot," Ed said. "But I couldn't do it now except by firing one of the other freaks, and they've both been with me over five years."

The stranger said: "You haven't asked me what I want yet."

Ed laughed. "Board and lodging and two dollars fifty. All right?"

"All right," Mr. Kowtshook said softly.

Ed stared at him. "You're crazy."

The man shook his head. "I'll take it."

Ed said: "You've only got to go to San Francisco, Chicago, New York—any of the big towns. There are outfits there that would pay you fifty, maybe seventy-five, a week as a starter."

Mr. Kowtshook shrugged; when he did, his whole body seemed to ripple in different directions.

"I don't like big cities," he said. "I'll work for you if you'll have me."

Ed thought a moment. "Okay. And I can stretch it to five dollars. More when we can afford it. We'll have to fit you in somewhere, though."

I said: "There's room in my tent. He can pitch in with me, if he's got no objections."

Mr. Kowtshook smiled. He had a wonderful smile, fresh and open like a baby's.

"I'd like to," he said, "very much."

I don't know why I said that—about there being room in my tent. I've

always been careful to keep by myself. I don't share easily; I guess it's through being the intellectual type. And this Mr. Kowtshook was a stranger. He had a soft voice and a pleasant smile, but so did the fellow in Trenton who sold me a hundred dollars' worth of dud oil shares back in '28.

But this was one thing I never regretted. Mr. Kowtshook never seemed to be an intruder, and if any of you has ever split the accommodation in a 160-pound tent, you'll find that difficult to believe. It's a funny thing—right from the start he called me Mike. He was calling every one of us by our first names within a couple of days. But no one ever called him anything but Mr. Kowtshook. I did once ask him what his other name was, and he told me. I never quite figured out how he managed to pronounce it.

He had a wonderful way with animals. From the beginning he helped Red out with the apes and the bears and the elephant, and a fortnight after he had arrived he had practically taken them over. One of the bears—Honey—could be really mean at times, but it only needed Mr. Kowtshook to step up to her, talking in a kind of cooing voice, and she gentled like a lamb. Funny thing was that Red never objected. With anyone else, and things being as they were, he would have been sure it was part of a dirty trick to pinch his job, but you couldn't feel like that with Mr. Kowtshook. Red helped out with other things, and it was he who suggested Mr. Kowtshook might even take them into the ring, and give Ed a rest.

He did, and it was sensational. He could make those animals do things that I would never have thought possible. It was almost as though they were reading his mind and he was reading theirs. I remember after the show once, listening to a couple of locals talking about the act.

"That business with the elephant," one of them said. "By gosh, that was something!"

"Elephant!" said the other. "That was no elephant. Just the skin and a couple of guys inside working it. I've seen that kind of thing before."

I'd never seen anything like Mr. Kowtshook before. Rafe, who, like all dwarfs, had a very touchy sense of his own importance, got so that he would follow him round like a dog, and I remember Hester saying once that she never slept good if Mr. Kowtshook didn't drop in for a cup of cocoa and a chat last thing at night.

There was the time when Sammy slipped from the rope, too.

It wasn't a high rope, because our Big Top wasn't anything much to shout about; I don't suppose it was more than twenty-five feet up. And we had a net, of course. But this night Sammy had had a little extra between the acts, and he tossed himself at Sue with just too much enthusiasm. She missed him, and he went right on and missed the edge of the net. He ran

his leg against a spike as he came to ground, and tore a hole in his thigh that jetted out blood like a fountain.

It looked terrible. We carted him out to the back, and Ed waggled his head, and said to one of the handymen: "Better go get a sawbones right away."

But Mr. Kowtshook came up from somewhere.

"Don't bother," he said.

He kneeled down beside Sammy, and wiped the blood away with a sponge. I stood watching. The blood was still coming out fast. Mr. Kowtshook reached into his pocket and took out a kind of canister.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Ointment," he said.

"There's no ointment will stop that flood," I said.

Mr. Kowtshook smiled, but he didn't say anything. He took the sponge again in his left hand and drew it across the wound. As he did, he followed up with the right hand, smarming the ointment on. I looked at the leg when he had finished. One tiny bead of blood stood out above the ointment at the very edge of the wound. Mr. Kowtshook gently wiped it away. He stood up.

"He'll be all right tomorrow."

Under the gleam of the ointment I could see the jaggedness of torn and bloody flesh, as though under glass.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Mr. Kowtshook said.

I met Sammy in the morning. He was walking around as spry as ever.

"How's the leg?" I asked him.

"I must have been lucky," he said. "Hardly a bruise."

I got him to show me. There was a thin blue line of scar, and the flesh around it was rather puffy. I went back to my tent and saw Mr. Kowtshook.

"That ointment," I said. "What brand is it?"

"No brand. It's an ointment of my own country." He fished the canister out of his pocket. "There's only a little left. After that . . ." He shrugged.

"Look," I said, "I've been wondering. "Which country do you come from, Mr. Kowtshook?"

"A very distant one."

"In Europe?"

"No. Much farther."

I can always tell when someone doesn't want to answer questions, and it's my view that every man has the constitutional right to keep his mouth shut. But naturally I got to wondering at times. A man with the talents he had wouldn't spend his time drifting around with a cheapjack circus

outfit at five dollars a week, unless he had a good reason. I figured it that maybe he'd done something against the laws of his own country, or offended someone important. And that he was only safe in this kind of set-up, where whoever was after him would never think of looking. I couldn't imagine how a man like him could ever have done anything bad, but there are some places where you don't have to do anything bad to offend important people, or even to break the law.

I didn't know what the facts were in Mr. Kowtshook's case, but I knew I was on his side.

Ed and me were talking one day.

"When he first came," Ed said, "I reckoned he'd been in some kind of trouble in another outfit. A woman, a fight—maybe both. I wasn't going to pry. A man's entitled to live down his past if he can. But since he's turned out to be so good, I've been a bit curious. I've been wondering what kind of outfit he was with. I've been inquiring, here and there. No one knows him. He's not been in the circus business before; not in this country."

"What do you think, then?" I said.

"What do I think? I think there's one country no one knows much about—Russia. I think he's a Russian. I think he's got on the wrong side of one of the big people; maybe pinched his girl-friend. And he had to leave in a hurry."

I said: "He could be in big-time circus."

Ed looked cunning. "And get his picture in the papers? Look at that Russian, Trotsky. He has to go around with an armed bodyguard, as though he were a gangster. Kowtshook wants to lie low."

"Could be," I said.

"And if he does," Ed said, "it's all right with me."

"It's all right with all of us," I said.

We moved about, on our usual tracks, playing the towns the big circuses didn't want. Times got a little better, and Mr. Kowtshook helped in that. He seemed quite contented. Ed put him on regular wages, and he thanked him, but he didn't seem much concerned. He used to sit in, reading a lot: either the dictionary, or Shakespeare, or the Bible. Once I tried to get him to read one of Miss Corelli's, but it was no good. He just smiled and thanked me, and he never opened the book. All the same, he and I got on well together. We would sit, each at one side of the trestle table I had rigged up in the tent, reading our books by the light of a paraffin lamp.

We were sitting like that, the night they came for him.

I didn't like the look of them when they stepped through the opening into the tent. They were as tall as or taller than Mr. Kowtshook and

though they were dressed normally, they had a foreign look about them. They spoke to Mr. Kowtshook in some foreign language. He answered them in English:

"Yes. I recognize you, and your duty."

One of them looked at me, and then spoke in English himself.

"You are ready to come with us?"

Mr. Kowtshook said: "I have no choice."

I broke in.

"Look, Mr. Kowtshook," I said, "I don't know who these fellows are, but I know they aren't G-men. And this is the United States of America. You don't have to go with anyone who isn't a federal or a state representative. I'll call a cop."

"No," he said.

"Hell," I said. "I tell you this is a free country. You're safe here. Let me get a cop and have these guys thrown out."

"I've had a good run, Mike," he said. "They've been looking for me for a long time. Just tell the others I was called away on private business. Don't let there be any fuss. And tell them how I've appreciated being with them. I've appreciated your letting me share your tent, too."

"Mr. Kowtshook," I said. "If there's anything I can do. Anything at all."

He looked at the two strangers, who stood waiting.

"Thanks, Mike. There's nothing."

"Shan't I see you again?" I asked him.

He smiled. "Watch the sky," he said. "Watch the sky"—he glanced at his watch—"about midnight."

He walked out of the tent, and the two men walked after him.

I read a lot in the magazines about spaceships and travel to the stars nowadays. I don't know what they expect to find there. A better world than this?

Somewhere up there in the sky is a world where a good, decent fellow like Mr. Kowtshook was so out of place that he had come here to escape. And they sent hunters after him, and even though he hid as a freak in a one-elephant circus, they found him in the end, and took him back for whatever kind of punishment they had thought up for him. It's not the kind of place I want to go to, and I can't help feeling that those who do have got some nasty surprises coming to them.

I watched at midnight. It was like the biggest, brightest meteor ever seen, a golden-white flame, traveling, vanishing, upwards.



The Space Ark

LANCELOT BIGGS: *SPACE-MAN*.

By Nelson Bond. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company. 224 pp. \$2.50

Nelson Bond, creator of the unforgettable *Mr. Mergenthwinker's Lobbies*, has once more reached into his bag of imaginative tricks and come up with a winner. Lancelot Biggs—huge, gangling, brilliant, eccentric and lovably clumsy—is a bumbling master mind who does everything just wrong enough to turn catastrophe into rib-tickling victory.

When he first boards the space-lugger *Saturn* he is a green fourth officer fresh from the classrooms of the Spaceways Academy, but he quickly displays a sort of left-handed genius that marks him as a man among men. Biggs uses his reverse logic to turn leaden garbage cans into solid gold, then, in quick but happy succession, he develops a radio which broadcasts not only through space but

through time; invents a velocity-intensifier which enables the *Saturn* to attain a cruising speed of 670,000,000 miles per hour; breeds the botanically invaluable blue rose; and continues to match these mere nothings time and time again, *ad* hilarious *infinitum*. His accomplishments, if accredited to any other character conceived by any other writer, would appear to be ludicrous and boring. But the reader is perfectly willing to accept "sech doin's" from a grown-up adolescent who walks "with the lissom grace of a stork on stilts" and whose chief topographical features are "an over-sized Adam's apple, ears like a loving cup's handles, and a grin like a Saint Bernard puppy."

The irrepressible Mr. Biggs is no newcomer to readers of science-fiction magazines. He has taken scientific pratfalls across the pages of various periodicals in the past; this, however, is his first appearance between the covers of a

book. May his future be bright and merry. This reviewer, for one, wants to see more of him!

SPACE HAWK.

By Anthony Gilmore, New York: Greenberg: Publisher. A Corwin Book. 274 pp. \$2.75

Unless you are a space-opera lover of the most enthusiastic sort, this book will hit you with all of the savage impact of two marshmallows bumping gently in outer space. If you like your spacemen wild and woolly and able to outdraw any five space-varmints in the galaxy, however, *SPACE HAWK* is a real buy.

Hawk Carse, the "Dead-Eye Dick" hero of the tale, is billed on the dust jacket as "The Greatest of Interplanetary Adventurers." If this means that he is portrayed as a nerveless, courageous fighting machine I suppose that the title may be justifiably supported by argument. Unfortunately, however, Carse is given as much personality as an iron bar: he is strong, hard and unbreakable, but he is devoid of any warmth. He swoops about the space lanes alternately pursuing and being pursued by an extremely bad man named Dr. Ku Sui, who presumably earned his degree in space-piracy.

There is plenty of plot and an abundance of action, with a corpse guaranteed to turn up every few pages, complete with a neat black

hole drilled either in his forehead or on his chest in the region of the heart.

Gilmore cannily leaves the way open for a sequel containing more of the same. After the last gigantic battle, Carse muses to himself in the next-to-last paragraph of the book that his friends will "... want to know about Ku Sui. What could he tell them? Was he dead? But he didn't know. He really didn't know. . . ."

THE HAPLOIDS.

By Jerry Sohl. New York: Rinehart and Co. 248 pp. \$2.50

DOUBLE JEOPARDY.

By Fletcher Pratt. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company. 214 pp. \$2.75

Both of these books deal with human creation sans sexual relationship between male and female.

In *THE HAPLOIDS* Jerry Sohl utilizes the mad genius of a lady scientist to conceive and nurture to maturity a race of warrior-women created from the female ovum without the aid of the male sperm. Parthenogenesis, or "virgin birth," produces a being with only one set of chromosomes. The sexually-conceived human is a diploid, having two complete sets of chromosomes, one from the male parent and one from the female. Sohl's women, having inherited chromosomes from the

ovum only, are haploids, and it is here that he finds his book title.

Fletcher Pratt's artificially-created people may be either male or female. But so far as can be seen there is no scientific theory behind Pratt's method of creation. His androids are created from a vaguely described chemical mixture, which, when put into a mysterious machine along with any object (whether human being or inanimate article), will turn into an exact copy. Pratt's androids, although extremely intelligent and receptive, are born without any knowledge or sense of right or wrong; hence, when they are trained by the wrong people they are potential sources of great evil.

THE HAPLOIDS and DOUBLE JEOPARDY share the same strengths and weaknesses. Both are strong of plot while extremely weak of characterization. In neither book is the writing distinguished. But both Jerry Sohl and Fletcher Pratt have the wonderful knack of making the reader itch to see what's going to happen on the next page. So long as their books contain this magical element neither author has to worry about his reading audience.

SANDS OF MARS.

By Arthur C. Clarke.

New York:

Gnome Press. 216 pp. \$2.75

To examine Arthur C. Clarke's much-reviewed and highly lauded EXPLORATION OF SPACE at this late

date, we think, would be to gild that lily most shamelessly, and we are not *quite* that shameless. But Mr. Clarke has recently come out with another work which is very worthy of review.

SANDS OF MARS is the story of a science-fiction writer's visit to Mars, which is in the early process of being settled. The selfless struggle of the earthling-frontiersmen strikes a responsive chord in the writer's makeup, and he finds that he is shifting his allegiance from the earth to the alien planet. In the end he becomes a citizen of Mars and remains there to work for its advancement.

More important than the story itself is the documentary style of the writing. The long journey to Mars is described so convincingly that the reader is tempted to rush out and book passage on the next space-liner. And Clarke's conception of the red planet is foreign enough to be exotic yet reasonable enough to be thoroughly believable.

In the past hundred years our world frontiers have become limited and uninviting. SANDS OF MARS suggests that new, other-world frontiers are just around the corner of time; no matter how many roots one has sunk into the earth, the prospect of visiting worlds which are now seen as glittering pinpoints of light in the evening sky cannot help but be exhilarating.—NOAH GORDON



Only the children saw it! The thing huddled in the far corner of the dark, musty old shed. When the tales of the boys and girls became too grisly to ignore, the grownups came down and stared warily into the gloomy interior of the old wooden structure. But all they could see was a black, indistinct shadow that seemed to hover between the ceiling and the floor. . . .

illustrator: Gerald McCann

The Shed

by E. EVERETT EVANS

THE THREE BOYS stood in the dim, dust-moted corner of The Shed, gazing curiously at that mysterious Shadow.

There seemed a tinge of color in it now, a faint yet malignant iridescent shimmering. It seemed much more solid, too, as though it was now beginning to take on substance.

They sensed movement there, as though there was a sort of an . . . an *aliveness*.

All at once their minds shrank back before a horrifying thought.

Had Sam had a part in making this change? And Kitty?

Was Heck a part of it?

The cow was forgotten for the moment, in their puzzled wondering . . . and in their remembering.

Cuddy Howland had just done a knee-to-ankle drop on the high trapeze, and was strutting about, justifiably proud of his exploit, as any eleven-year-old boy would be. He popped another piece of gum into his mouth, to be added to the already-large cud there.

"I see that Ole Shadow's still here," he turned nonchalantly towards the other two boys.

Hutch glanced over towards the corner as he slid down the long rope that was suspended from an iron ring in the skylight forty or so feet above.

"My papa says there probably really isn't any Shadow there at all." He giggled as he came over to where Cuddy was standing. "Papa's kinda blind, sometimes."

"Aw, all grown-ups is blind about some things," short, heavy-set Stub Aiken announced from the low trapeze where, after vigorous swinging, he was now "letting the ole cat die."

He jumped down and joined the other two, close to that corner of the big, drafty shed which the railroad people occasionally used for the storing of excess freight, but which was generally empty, and had been preempted by the town boys as a playhouse and gymnasium.

Now, as the three boys came closer to the dimly lighted, dusty corner, their footsteps involuntarily slowed, although they were not conscious of any fear.

But the Unknown is always reason for caution, even if it is not feared. And this Shadow, or whatever it was, was a most peculiar and unusual thing. It seemed circular in shape; tubelike; about five feet through. As near as they could tell, it extended from the dirt floor of The Shed clear to the roof. It couldn't be seen outside, above the roof, and up beyond the rafters inside it was too dim to see clearly.

The thing was of a nondescript color, mostly gray. It did nothing spectacular—merely seemed to *be* there, that was all anyone knew about it. It had appeared one day about a fortnight before. At least, it had never been noticed before that day.

Hutch cocked his head on one side. "Chuck Bernard brought his papa down here, too, the other day, and after looking at it for a long time his papa said he couldn't even see anything. But Chuck and I could see it just as plain. Later on, after his papa went home, it started raining, and that Ole Shadow done got brighter, there in the dark."

"I was here last Sat'day when we had that thunder-and-lightning storm," Cuddy observed. "Just like you say, the darker it got the brighter it got. Seemed to kinda glimmer, something like swamp-fire, or like rotten wood-punk does in the dark."

Stub looked questioningly at them. "What do you 'spose it *is*, anyhow?"

The others were dumbly silent. It was something none of them understood. But that only made it the more interesting.

"It sure ain't nothing to be scairt of," Hutch snorted. "Grown folks is so silly, sometimes. Always 'fraid of things."

Yet none of the boys had ever ventured too close, in spite of this generally held feeling. Even Heck Osbun, the town daredevil, had never walked into or through it, or even very far into its corner. Yet Heck would dive off the top stringpiece of the Cemetery Bridge into only ten feet of water, or run through a huge bonfire of autumn leaves.

No, this strange visitor was just one of those things small children take so casually for granted, as a part of the big world they do not, as yet, know all about. But there certainly was no reason for giving it any *special* notice or attention . . . nor did they.

The hot midday August sun shone blisteringly. Few adults were to be

seen, even along the three blocks of Chicago Street where the stores were. Those who did find it necessary to be out carried an umbrella or parasol in one hand to keep off the burning rays of Old Sol. The other hand usually carried a palm-leaf or folding fan, with which they vainly tried to stir up a little cooling air.

Over on Pearl Street a chunky, freckled boy of almost-twelve was disconsolately ambling along the unpaved street, scuffing his bare feet through the thick dust, which was much cooler a half-inch down than it was on top. He liked to walk thus in the dust. It gave him such an "ookey" feeling as the dry, powdery dust squilched up around and between his toes.

But today Hutch was not thinking much of that. He was vastly worried.

He turned into Marshall Street, under the huge maples and elms whose branches, interlacing above the street, made it a trifle cooler. He relaxed a bit.

Coming toward him, but on the other side of the street, he saw another shuffling figure, dressed as he was in blouse and knee pants, a somewhat frowsy, wide-brimmed straw hat settled well down over his forehead, shading his eyes. Hutch crossed over.

"Hey, Cuddy!" The other looked up, then hurried his steps a wee mite.

"Lo, Hutch. Didja find Sam?"

"Nope. Nobody's saw him at all today. I been all over town, and I can't find hide nor hair of him. You seen him?"

"Unh-uh. Wonder what become of him?"

"Dunno. He never run off before."

They stood digging their toes in the soft dust, grieving for their lost friend.

This Sam, of whom they spoke, was a Coolwater institution. A large, friendly black spaniel that everyone knew and loved, he was chiefly known for his devotion to the big white horses that pulled the Fire Engine Pumper. No fire in Coolwater was complete nor official unless Sam was running and leaping about those horses on their run.

Nominally Sam belonged to Von Hutchinson, driver of the Pumper, and father of Hutch. Actually, Sam belonged to—or no, rather one should say that everyone in Coolwater belonged to Sam.

Now he was missing, although so far only a few of the boys knew it. And they were very, very worried about their pal.

"Let's go find Stub, and hunt some more."

"Yeh, let's."

They trotted across the street and across the corner of Old Lady Greene's lawn, disregarding the yell of exasperation that came from the big rocker on the porch where she was sitting, fanning herself. Around the fence and

into the coal yard they started, for that way they could climb the back fence onto the low roof of the shed of Aiken's Livery, where they were quite likely to find Stub.

But hardly had they entered the yard when they were jerked short by the sudden ululating, sliding scream of the Water Works' siren, followed almost immediately by the first notes of the fire bell. As one, they wheeled and ran for the fire house, down the alley between Hutch's house and the old billboard surrounded hole where the junkyard had once been.

They dashed through the back door of the firehouse just as the horses were released from their stalls, and used this short cut to the bell rope. Hutch grabbed it first and started ringing it, while the fireman who relinquished it ran for his place on the running board, calling back over his shoulder, "Third Ward."

Cuddy took the clapper rope and, as Hutch let up a moment on the tolling, struck the bell three times—the Third Ward signal.

Then, as they resumed pulling the bell cord, they watched the completion of the harnessing. This was always interesting. The harnesses were always hung carefully on ropes and hooks just above the horses' positions on either side of the pole. A single jerk on a small rope dropped the complete harnesses on the horses' backs, a few quick snaps of buckles, and they were ready to roll.

"By golly, that's a neat trick!" Cuddy's voice was all admiration.

Men, women and children were pouring onto the streets now, the heat forgotten. Men who were members of the fire company were running up, or dashing up on the bicycles, to leap onto their places on Pumper or Hook-and-Ladder.

Von Hutchinson gathered the reins and the horses bore the engine, on which Bill Taylor was vigorously stoking the fire, out onto the streets. The Hook-and-Ladder swung out right after them.

As soon as the trucks had left, Hutch and Cuddy abandoned the bell rope, and took out after them. Racing up Monroe Street, they cut across to Clay and up that to Waterman Avenue, using every available short-cut. They reached the scene of the fire almost as soon as the apparatus.

It wasn't much of a fire, luckily for the owners of the small framehouse, but the boys were not interested in that.

Sam hadn't appeared in his accustomed place, running with the engine horses.

There were excited comments from everyone present about this. It was a nine-days' wonder.

Where *was* Sam? What'd happened to him? It was absolutely unthinkable! Sam *never* missed a fire.

Hutch grinned briefly and ruefully, remembering that day last Christ-

mas vacation. He and Babe Vance had made a harness for the dog, and Sam was pulling them on their sled. They were down near the High School, heading east, when the fire bell rang.

Sam had whirled, throwing them both into a snowbank, and had run to the fire, dragging that leaping, bouncing sled behind him, nearly tripping the racing horses time and again.

Back again at the firehouse, the horses returned to their stalls and wiped down, the harnesses again carefully hooked up ready for the next alarm, Hutch tapped the single note that told the townfolk the fire was out.

Von Hutchinson turned to the boys.

"Where's Sam?"

"Dunno," they looked at him sadly, and Hutch added slowly, "Haven't seen him all day. Been looking for him all over, too."

Von Hutchinson slowly shook his head and made his way to the big, cushioned, wire-reinforced chair he habitually occupied. He sat down and tipped it into a comfortable position against the shady side of the open firehouse door.

"You better keep looking."

"I'm going to, Papa," and the two boys, now joined by several others, moved slowly away.

They couldn't imagine life without Sam, was their excited comment. The town would never be the same if he was really, truly lost.

"What'll we do now?" someone asked.

"Let's go down by the tracks and look for him," Stub Aiken suggested, and started off down Monroe Street towards the depot. Hutch and Cuddy Howland elected to follow him; others said they would look in other directions.

The three boys spent an hour looking all around the railroad yards, the Mill, the Foundry, the Stove Works, and the dump. Nowhere could they find trace of Sam, nor had anyone they asked seen him.

Discouraged, they drifted finally into The Shed, and desultorily played for awhile on the rope and trapezes. But they found no pleasure in it.

After about ten minutes Hutch slid down the long rope and wandered over to look at the Shadow, which he thought seemed much plainer than usual. As he came nearer, he gave a sudden start, then went as close as he dared. He squatted down, peering at the ground beneath the thing.

Suddenly he jumped up, wheeled about and raced over to a pile of long, slender poles. Picking one up, he carried it back. Stub dropped off the low trap, and Cuddy from the high one, and came running up.

"What you found?"

"Something under there looks familiar," Hutch was tight-lipped. He

began poking at two shiny objects, working them across the close-packed dirt floor, ignoring the Shadow, which was rippling and twisting as though annoyed by this intrusion.

The other two were already squatting down and examining the objects when Hutch, having poked them far outside the Shadow's range, dropped the pole and came over.

"By Golly, it's the buckle and plate from Sam's collar," Stub's voice was small, awed.

"How d'y'a 'spose they ever got here?" Cuddy, too, was very quiet.

Hutch took the two pieces tenderly in his hands, turning them over and over. The dog's collar had been an ordinary leather strap, but that was gone now. All that remained was the silver buckle and the silver name plate. These had been solemnly presented by the businessmen of the little town, one evening during a band concert in Library Park. The plate was engraved, "Sam, First Citizen of Coolwater, Michigan, 1901."

Suddenly Hutch began to cry, great racking sobs, with huge tears rolling unashamed down his cheeks.

"That damned Shadow done et him!"

The other two noticed neither the "swear-word" nor the tears. They were too close to both, themselves.

"SAM'S MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE," the *Coolwater Moon* called it in the half-column, headlined article on the front page. Every one of the 4,957 inhabitants of the town felt an unaccountable shiver of fear as they heard about, read and discussed this unusual happening.

Life was ordinarily a placid thing in small towns of this type back in the 1900's. Such uncanny occurrences were so rare as to be a tremendous shock.

There was what amounted almost to a pilgrimage out to that old dilapidated railroad shed that evening after supper. Chief of Police Paine showed how important he felt the occasion to be by wearing his seldom-donned uniform.

It was noticeable that the milling throng did not venture very close to that enigmatic corner of The Shed, though the Shadow could be plainly seen even in the dusk. Indeed, the front ranks of the shifting crowd that did venture inside were invariably the youngsters, not their elders.

"You come back away from there!" was the frequent cry of distracted and bewildered parents, as one child after another would press closer for a look.

It was apparent that the *Shadow-thing* was very real to the children, but only an unexplainable mistiness in the air to the materialistic, stolid minds and eyes of the grown-ups. Yet it was the elders, not the children, who felt vague, uneasy and semifrightened chills before the eeriness of the *thing*.

Yet none could tell why they felt so. It was such an ordinary, prosaic place here—this old, dusty, seldom-used shed. How could there possibly be any mystery, any fantastic happening, in such a place?

School Superintendent McLeroy, with several of his teachers, came. They peered about learnedly—from a respectful distance—discussed the matter *sotto voce* among themselves. Finally Mr. McLeroy faced the crowd, cleared his throat, and assumed a dignified stance.

"We have reached the unanimous conclusion that this so-called Shadow is merely that, a shadow. It could not possibly have been the cause of Sam's disappearance. You will note that there are several places in the roof where shingles are either gone entirely or spread far apart. It is the manner in which the light shines down through these and reflects from the dust-particles in suspension in the air, accentuated by the dimness already inherent here inside the building, that makes this peculiar effect. We are positive there is absolutely nothing mysterious nor dangerous here. Merely an aberrative effect of light-rays."

"But there's no sunlight now, and the Moon and stars aren't bright enough to make a shadow," Ernie Wall piped up.

"Tut, tut, young man, you don't understand."

Two or three of the boys giggled among themselves.

"Neither does he, Ole Windbag."

But one thing was clear before the hour was up, in spite of this clean bill of health given by the noted educators—no child would be allowed to play there again with his parents' consent.

"Oughta tear the place down," more than one man muttered.

"Be better to burn it," another somewhat sheepishly argued.

"Have to get the railroad's permission, first," Chief Paine spoke in his best official voice. "It's railroad property, and we can't just take such matters into our own hands."

"Anybody talked to Nachbauer about it?" Nachbauer (everyone in Coolwater pronounced the name the same as the word "Neighbor") was the Station Agent for the Railroad.

"Let's make up a committee and go see him."

Several important men grouped themselves together and departed for the Depot.

In the dusk the weird shadow seemed to have a very slight but noticeable glow about it, which became slightly brighter, and far more eerie, as the darkness increased.

It grew noticeable, and so malevolent in appearance that soon there was a hurried and general exodus. By eight-thirty no one was left in The Shed, or even very close to it.

"You're *never* to go in there again!" Stub Aiken's parents told him

when they got home. And Stub knew, as well as though he was present in every home, that the other youngsters were being given the same orders.

"But where'll we play?"

"Anywhere but *there*! You can find some other place just as good or better. That old shed is about ready to fall down, anyway. It's no fit place to play in any case. Especially not now."

"Aw, you're just scairt of that ole Shadow. It's nothing to be 'fraid of—you heard Ole McLeroy say that."

"None of your smartness, now. You get for bed, and no back talk, either!"

The next morning shortly after breakfast there was quite a crowd of the children milling about the open doorways of The Shed. All were excitedly conjecturing the possibilities and probabilities of this exciting, unheard-of happenstance.

Yet none of them were brazen enough to defy those strict parental rulings, to the extent of going inside to play.

"Can't see why there's so much fuss," was the general cry.

"Nothing there to worry about," Cuddy Howland was disgusted. "Just a trick Shadow. We been playing there every day, and it never hurted us none."

"Old folks always getting scairt of nothing," Stub was equally in revolt.

"Shadow done et Sam, though, didn't it?"

That brought up sharply the tragedy of the disappearance of their beloved canine friend, and a pall of sadness dropped over the group.

"Anybody seen my kittie?" little eight-year-old Christine Swanson, who lived just across the tracks a couple of hundred yards away, came crying into the crowd.

Quick questioning disclosed that her Maltese cat had been missing since the evening before.

Hutch turned to his cronies. "Bet Ole Shadow done et her, too."

"Wonder how it eats things?" Ernie Wall was one of those youngsters who always want to know "How" and "Why" about everything.

"Didn't see no bones ner hide ner anything like that when we found Sam's collar," Cuddy Howland considered the matter gravely.

"Naw, just the metal parts, nothing else," Hutch added.

"Did you look real close?" Iva Goudy asked from among the group of interested girls.

"Sure I looked close," Hutch answered in an annoyed tone. "Think I ain't got sense enough to do that?"

"I just wondered," meekly, as the giggling girls moved a little farther away from those lordly, supercilious males.

Stub called to Heck Osburn, who had just come up. "Chris Swanson's cat's missing. We think Ole Shadow et her. Dast ya to go in and see!"

Fourteen-year-old Heck swaggered toward the open doorway. "Heck, nothing in there to be scairt of."

"Only you're 'fraid to go in and look," a voice back in the group taunted.

"Who said that?" Heck whirled. No one answered. Everyone looked guiltless.

"I ain't scairt of nothing like that there Shadow," Heck announced, plangently. "Heck, I'd go in in a minute only my Mom and Pop tole me they'd skin me if I did."

Little Christine started to cry anew. "My kittie's been et up by that mean old thing in there."

Heck stepped further into the open doorway, peering about.

"Shadow's still there."

"Yeh, and it looks solider and brighter, too," Stub Aiken was peering around Heck's body. The others crowded closer.

"Looks like something bright, there on the floor under it." Hutch, too, was scanning the Shed, Shadow and floor.

"Aw, I can't see nothing."

"Me neither."

"I do. Something little . . . something golden shiny."

Christine set up a louder wail. "My kittie had a gold bell on a ribbon on her neck."

Heck looked searchingly back at the group. "If you'll all promise not to peach on me, I'll go in and look."

"Dast ya, Heck?"

"Heck, yes. I dast anything. But I'd catch it if my folks ever found out."

"All right, we'll all promise not to peach."

A great nodding of heads in agreement.

"Cross yer hearts?"

They all swore the time-honored oath, to cross their hearts and hope to die, that if they lied he could spit in their eye.

"All right, you keep watch and yell if anyone comes, and I'll go in."

He slipped inside the doorway, ran swiftly across to the farther wall. They could see him cautiously sidling along, inching his way slowly yet courageously ever closer . . . closer to that now-dread Shadow.

The little group held their collective breaths as he advanced nearer and nearer to that *thing*.

A querulous voice from the distance began calling.

"Christine! Chris-TEEEENE!" Nearer and nearer it came.

Hutch called into the semidarkness of The Shed. "Somebody's coming, Heck!"

Then he, with the rest, faded from sight with that uncanny quickness known only to creatures of the wild and young children who are, after all, also creatures of the wild.

By common but wordless consent most of the boys who'd been at The Shed reassembled at the swimming hole near the Waterworks. But after a few dives and splashings they began to worry because Heck Osburn hadn't shown up.

"Prob'ly didn't know we was coming here."

"Could be."

Dives and paddling grew increasingly lackadaisical, showing a noticeable lack of interest and enthusiasm for their sport.

Hutch climbed out, started dressing. "I'm going back and find Heck." Stub and Cuddy splashed to shore. "Wait for us."

In silence they dressed. Their pace at the start was a mere amble, but before they'd gone halfway they were running.

Somehow . . . they could not tell why . . . they were frightened now. . . .

But loyally determined to find their friend.

Across the tracks they raced, dodging expertly the slow-moving switch engine and shunted cars. Past the freight docks and Milner's Slaughter House, they arrived, largely panting, out of breath, at The Shed.

They slowed abruptly, then crept silently toward the nearest open doorway in that end of the building where that strange and now terrifying Shadow held forth.

Stealthily they peeked in. It took some time for their eyes to become accustomed to the dust-laden dimness of the interior after the bright blindingness of the summer sun.

"He ain't here!" Stub exploded in relief after a long, close look.

"Musta gone home," Hutch suggested.

"Naw, he wouldn't go home. 'Tain't dinner time yet," Stub snorted derisively.

"Maybe he went over to the Slaughter House."

"Let's go see."

They walked gingerly across the junk-filled vacant lots to the local abattoir—a place of infinite fascination, with its strange sights and stranger smells.

It was a *thrill*—because it outraged their every sense of animal love—to watch the killings. To see calm, innocent cattle led one by one into that room with the fetid smells and the stained, concrete floor always a'swish with running water. To see brawny, heavy-set Gus Milner and his equally

big son, Charley, slip the snubbing rope through the ring in the cow's nose, and relentlessly draw its head down and down until its nose touched the heavy ring set in the floor, then fasten it.

Their hearts did strange nip-ups just back of their mouths as one of the men would pick up the heavy sledge, and with one great, perfectly aimed blow, strike the animal just between and a bit above the eyes. They always jumped at the sudden slump as the carcass dropped, spraddled and lifeless, to the floor.

They watched two cows killed, then remembered their errand.

"Seen Heck Osbun today?" Hutch asked Charley.

"Heck? Nooo, don't seem to remember seeing him," Charley grunted as he started toward the pens for the next bovine victim.

Just as they were turning dejectedly away, they heard Gus call to his son. "How many more, Charley?"

"Two more of Strong's, then that sick cow of Purdy's."

"Sick cow?" Cuddy was all interest. "What's wrong with it?"

"Dunno," Charley grunted in his usual laconic manner. "Just pretty sick. Got running sores all over it."

"They don't make meat outta cows like that, do they?" Stub's horrified voice squeaked.

"'Course not," contemptuously. "A guy'd die if he et meat like that. That's why we kill 'em and burn 'em, so nobody will."

The boys weren't a hundred feet on their way back towards town when a sudden thought struck them all at once. They went into a huddle.

"Golly, 'spose it'd work?"

A shrugging of collective shoulders. Who knew?

"It'll be fun trying," Hutch grinned and giggled.

Indian-stealthy they crept back. Stub was lookout, while Hutch and Cuddy led the dazed, almost-dead and unresisting animal across lots and into The Shed, closer to that dread Shadow than they'd ever been before except when Hutch retrieved Sam's collar parts.

Suddenly they stopped short, for the Shadow now seemed subtly different. More colorful, more solid, and a movement to it that was sort of an . . . an *aliveness*!

They quailed before this changed growth. What could it mean? What could have caused it?

A sudden thought panicked them. Could Sam have had a part in this horrifying growth? And Kitty?

Was Heck a part of it?

"There's something under there," Stub pointed a shaking finger.

"Where at? I don't see nothing."

"Clear over, 'bout a yard from the wall."

"I see the gold bell there."

"I see the other now, too." Cuddy was leaning forward in excitement. "It's a knife!" he suddenly blurted.

"Yeh, a three-blader stag-horn," Stub added hollowly.

Hutch's whisper cut the silence. "Heck had a knife like that."

Stub wheeled suddenly and was sick on the dirt floor. Cuddy turned and threw himself face down on the floor, wracked by sobs.

Hutch stood there stolidly, seemingly hypnotized into a sort of trance. His face was white, strained, his eyes staring unseeingly.

Dimly, at last, he sensed streamers of the Shadow pushing out, pulsing, reaching . . . reaching toward him.

One almost touched him before he seemed to awaken enough to jump back. He bumped into the cow.

That reminded him. He yanked off his cap and slapped it sharply against the cow's flank. The animal lumbered forward, straight into that Shadow. Well within, it stopped suddenly. Hutch could see the Shadow begin to wind and twist about the cow, which began a piteous lowing.

He could see that the now-terrified animal was straining to move, but could not. He yelled to the others, "Lookout!"

They came to his side and watched in awed wonder. The strange and evil mistiness was curling and entwining itself all about and around the cow. Thicker and thicker grew the folds of Shadow-substance. The body of the cow was growing dimmer to their sight.

The colors of the *thing* were more pronounced, now. Flaming, angry reds, flashing blues, sickly greens and yellows.

Suddenly a wild animal scream tumbled the boys backward . . . an agonizing, unhuman scream such as animals sometimes make in moments of stressed peril or anguished pain.

When they looked again, the cow was gone.

That hair-raising scream would ordinarily have sent them racing pell-mell far from that maddening sight and sound. But now they were horror-bound, held helpless, without power of movement, by this vastly unusual and non-understandable happening.

And as they stood there, watching, that Shadow seemed to begin a new and entirely different kind of writhing. Its colors pulsated with bright, unearthly shades and tints.

They sensed that it had gone mad with some sort of agony. It was whirling, roiling, convoluting, seeming to turn inside out and back again. It boiled and frothed. It churned and writhed jerkily, insanely, degenerately. It shot out streamers of viscous substance that turned back onto themselves in fantastic and unfathomable knots.

As it looped and twisted about itself, its colors waxed and waned, running the gamut of shades. It was a kaleidoscope gone crazy.

To the eyes of the fascinated boys it gradually grew more and more tenuous. The colors faded until their eyes ached with trying to see them at all.

Suddenly, not with their ears, but deep inside their minds, they heard or sensed a high, excruciating keening that persisted momentarily, then trailed off as though it was retreating into a far, unknown nothingness.

The Shadow was gone.

For long, long minutes the boys could not move. Finally Hutch shuddered, a long, rippling movement that ran through his entire body.

Slowly he straightened. His eyes seemed to refocus sanely. Then he grinned.

"Dibs on the high trap!" He raced towards the center of The Shed.

"Dibs on the long rope!" Cuddy was only momentarily behind him.

Stub scuffed disgustedly after them.

"Darn, I *always* get stuck with that baby trap!"



MEMO TO THE READER:

We have bought what we believe to be one of ARTHUR C. CLARKE'S most outstanding short stories. It is entitled "The Parasite" and will appear in the next issue of the *Avon Science Fiction and Fantasy Reader*. We are sure Mr. Clarke needs no introduction. His *Exploration of Space* has been popularly acclaimed, and a new novel by him is reviewed in this issue.

His latest story is a tight little masterpiece of horror and suspense that is "must" reading for connoisseurs of the macabre.

DON'T MISS "THE PARASITE"!

illustrator:
Mott Lawrence



Nakie was the little blue man. Karn was little, too, but he was pink. They came with the house that Julie and Harry bought when they were married. But their preference for the human with "the outthrust hillocks" damn near ruined Harry's honeymoon!

Come Blow Your Horn!

by MILTON LESSER

THE WALK from the depot was a pleasant one. Everything about it was pleasant—the rural community with its new houses, the still-bright autumn sunshine, the kids playing on the sidewalks. But most pleasant to Harry was the fact that he'd be coming home to his wife of two weeks. The honeymoon was over, true enough; but he felt that their whole life would be one long, wonderful honeymoon, and now he was coming home to their modest house from his first day at the office.

He ambled up the walk, put his key in the lock and opened the door. Then he called, "Julie! Julie, darling, I'm home."

No answer. Julie was probably in the living-room, putting up some curtains. He held the half-dozen red roses behind his back and walked through the foyer to the living-room. Julie wasn't there.

Then he heard the voices. Julie was in the kitchen, talking with someone. He could hear the voices clear enough to tell that one was Julie's, but not clear enough to tell what they were saying. He walked on into the kitchen, the roses still behind his back.

Julie sat cross-legged on the floor. She wore blue jeans and a tee-shirt, and Harry wanted to run and kiss her. But he didn't. Julie was saying:

"... certainly you're welcome to stay here as long as you want. As if I'd ever let you go . . ."

Harry dropped the roses. The little blue man was sitting on one of the pantry shelves. The little pink man squatted on the table, next to a bowl of chef's salad which Harry liked so much.

Julie saw him then. She smiled and nodded her head, but it was not the sort of greeting Harry had expected. She had kissed him goodbye this morning like he was going on a safari into the jungle. Now she said:

"Aren't they darling? Aren't they just darling, Harry?"

Harry scratched his head. He had to admit they were cute. Standing upright they would have come half way up between his knees and his belt. Each one wore a leathery garment which matched perfectly the color of

his skin—baby blue for the little man on the pantry, dusty pink for the elfin figure near the salad bowl. Each one wore a pointed hat like a dunce-cap, pink for the blue man, blue for the pink man, and each hat had a tassel which bobbed up and down whenever either the blue man or the pink man moved his head.

But this could not be. Harry took a step back and landed on the roses, but he hardly noticed it. Such creatures did not exist. You read about them in fairy tales, or perhaps when you were little you dreamed about them and you were glad because it was a nice dream—but they did not exist.

"Oaf!" shrilled the little blue man on the pantry. "Be careful, you're stepping on our flowers!"

The little pink man nodded and jumped nimbly off the table. He landed on all fours, but then he got quickly to his feet and scrambled toward the roses. Harry stepped back again and the little pink hands reached out and gathered in the flowers.

"He didn't hurt them much," the pink man told his companion. "See—only one flower is crushed." Then, with the roses tucked against his chest, he scurried up the table-leg and sat near the salad bowl again.

"Aren't they darling?" Julie repeated.

The blue man sniffed. "It's not much of an offering. Only six flowers, and they're hardly beyond the bud stage. But then, I suppose he meant well . . ."

The pink man nodded, detached three of the flowers—including the one which Harry had crushed—from the bouquet, and tossed them to his companion on the pantry.

"Yes, he meant well," agreed the blue man, sniffing his flowers. But he could not keep the hurt look from his face when he glanced at the one crushed rose. "But a clumsy oaf, anyway."

"I suppose so," said the pink man. "On the other hand, the creature with the two outthrust hillocks located on the anterior beneath her head is entirely more satisfactory."

"She has the right amount of respect," said the little blue figure, jumping off the pantry, landing as nimbly as a cat, and cuddling comfortably in Julie's lap. Julie stroked his head beneath the pointed cap.

Harry was breathing hard, as if he had just gone through some strenuous physical activity. "Julie," he said, "I demand to know what's going on!" Even as he said it, that sounded silly. How on earth should Julie know what was going on? The little blue man and the little pink man were creatures which could not be—but there they were, and Julie would know no more about it than he did.

"THEY come with the house," Julie told him.

"They what?"

"They come with the house. We bought the house, so we got them too. But I don't mind—I think they're wonderful." She continued to stroke the blue head beneath the pink cap.

"We *are* wonderful," the pink man said from his perch atop the table. "Aren't we, Nakie?"

The blue man named Nakie nodded. "We certainly are. Everywhere we go, the creatures can see that at a glance. It's fortunate, in a way, because since we own the universe they have no choice—it simply makes it more pleasant for them because we're wonderful."

"We are wonderful," the pink man said again.

Julie smiled. "Nakie here talks more than Karn. But they're both cute, Harry. Wait till you get to know them."

Harry walked over to the pantry and opened it. He took out a bottle of Scotch, walked to the sink, picked up a glass and poured himself a stiff shot. He drank it fast, but it did not produce the desired effect, so he poured another drink and drank that too.

"I'm seeing things," he said. "I'm seeing things and hearing things. Julie, tell me I'm seeing things and hearing things."

Nakie laughed. He got up off Julie's lap and danced around the room on mincing feet. "The one with the outthrust hillocks is much the wiser," he said.

Karn took off his little blue cap and rubbed his pink head. "I'm glad papa gave us this universe," he said. "I like the one with the outthrust hillocks. What's more important, she appreciates us."

Nakie shook his head. "You're worrying for nothing. They all will appreciate us. We're so wonderful, everyone appreciates us."

"Except papa," Karn told him.

"Even papa, in his own way. But then, you must remember that, being our father, papa is as wonderful as we are."

"Almost," Karn admitted.

Harry placed his hands carefully under Nakie's armpits and picked him up. He was light, incredibly light, but he was made of real solid flesh. Harry could feel it beneath his fingers—he had hoped that he wouldn't, but he did.

"I don't think he likes us," Karn said.

Nakie laughed. "Oh, he does. He does. He's just a bit of an oaf, but he likes us. You saw how he drank that alcoholic beverage?"

"Yes."

"That would make this a second stage culture. Extremely primitive. It

may not even be worth our while taking over this universe, Karn. I checked the charts before we left, and the next inhabited system is more than eight light years away, on a planet circling a sun somewhat bigger than this one."

"Well, why don't we go there?"

"Uh-uh," Nakie shook his head. "The creatures there are even more primitive. Sub-one stage. No electricity, no firearms. Not even anthropomorphic religion yet. They never could appreciate us."

"And you're sure these creatures can?"

"Certainly, certainly. Look at the one with the outthrust hillocks."

The liquor had begun to go to Harry's head. "You're referring to my wife," he said. "You may call her Julie. Or Mrs. Carter might even be better. But not the 'one with the outthrust hillocks'!"

Nakie's grin was a wry one. "That's merely a biological distinction so we can tell you apart. We don't mean to be disrespectful. We are never disrespectful to our subjects, are we, Karn?"

"No, we are not. Long experience has demonstrated that it does not pay."

There was a silence, in which Harry tried to think. The circus was in town, so maybe they were from the circus. He shrugged that idea off. No circus ever had creatures like this. Of course, they could be midgets—painted midgets for some publicity stunt. Send a pair of painted midgets to each house in the community and they'd leave by saying something like "now, don't forget to come to the circus."

Harry smiled. "You're from the circus," he said.

Nakie frowned. "I knew they were primitive," he said. "But I guess they're even more primitive than we thought. He just doesn't understand."

Julie said, "They come with the house."

"Well, not exactly," Karn told her. "This house happens to be a good doorway to our own spatial plane. Oh, you might consider it as an area where two bubbles interlock. Your universe is one bubble, ours is another. The space-time continuum contains thousands of such bubbles—some postulate that there is an infinity of them."

"And," Nakie explained, "papa gave us this one to play with. It is our little universe. I think that was nice of papa."

"It's just that he realizes how wonderful we are," Karn said.

Harry wanted to say something, but the little blue Nakie ignored him. "You know, Karn, there is one thing we've forgotten."

"What's that?"

"How, precisely, are we going to divide our domain?"

Karn considered. "Oh, I don't know."

"Well, it's important. Tell you what, Karn. I'll take the creatures with the outthrust hillocks on this world, and you take the others."

"The others?" Karn was insulted. "You mean like this oaf?" He pointed to Harry.

Nakie nodded.

"Not on your life, my brother. If these two are a good sampling, the ones with the outthrust hillocks will make much better subjects. This one is convinced we are wonderful, but the oaf is not. I don't like that division of power."

Nakie's baby-blue face became bluer. "Now, listen. I'm your older brother, and what I say goes . . ."

"Oh, yes? I'll call papa . . ."

"You forget that I'm the only one who can call him." Nakie reached into a pocket of his leather trousers and took out a tiny golden horn. "I have the horn and I alone can call papa."

Karn's pink form hurtled through the air at his blue brother. But Nakie stepped aside and Karn landed on the kitchen floor. Then, smiling playfully, Nakie jumped up on the sink and, from there, leaped out the kitchen window. Screaming in a high treble, Karn followed him.

For an instant the pink figure stood poised on the sill, then it leaped off into space and disappeared.

HARRY knew that something was wrong. It was so intangible that he could not place it, but something was not quite right. This was very annoying: it was as if they had had an objectionable visitor and now that visitor had departed. Harry could not tell who he was, but he knew he was relieved that the guest had departed . . . And then, abruptly, he forgot that, too.

"I brought you these flowers," he said.

Julie ran into his arms and kissed him. "Darling," she said, "you're home from work."

Harry kissed her again, and then he brought his hands out from behind his back. That was odd. He did not have the flowers. Then, he gasped.

"My gosh," he said.

"What on earth's the matter?"

"My flowers . . ."

Harry took three of them off the table, near the salad bowl. He found the other three on the pantry, and one of them was crushed. "Well, here they are." He smiled ruefully. "I don't know how I spread them out like that, but here they are . . ."

"Hah!" Julie tweaked his nose. "My kisses are just potent, that's all."

Harry sat down to dinner. Not only was Julie a pretty little trick, but she could cook. This steak was delicious. Just the right amount of mushrooms, perfect seasoning . . .

He stood up from the table with a sigh. He certainly could appreciate married life—there was nothing like it. Especially with Julie. He could appreciate Julie as much as—as much as Julie could appreciate Nakie.

Now, who or what was Nakie?

He heard Julie doing the dishes inside, and he put his magazine down. He walked into the kitchen and put his arm around his wife's waist. She said, playfully, "Careful, I'll splash you."

"Honey, do you know anyone named Nakie?"

"Nakie? Um, no. I don't think so. That's an odd name, Nakie. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, just wondering. Forget it."

It *was* an odd name, and he did not know how it had come into his head. But soon he forgot all about it. Julie finished the dishes and then they sat around and talked for a while, and then Julie put on some records and they danced.

Harry did not think of the name Nakie again. He was busy dancing with his wife, and he loved every moment of it.

After a while, she said:

"It's late, Harry, and you have to get up early in the morning. Why don't we go upstairs?"

Harry thought that was a good idea.

HARRY got to the office early. It was not intentional, but he awoke a few minutes earlier than he had to, and he caught the eight twenty-two for Penn Station.

Harry was the junior partner in a big real estate firm, and when he got to the office only Miss White, the receptionist, was there. He said hello and then he passed through the big general office to his own private quarters. The sign on the door said:

HARRY CARTER

Acreage

He was proud of that sign—he was only twenty-six and already a junior partner. There was no telling how far he might go. Whistling, he closed the door behind him.

The little pink man sat on the desk and the little blue man sat above him, on the case of the portable typewriter. There was a discoloration around the pink man's right eye. Evidently, Nakie had won that fight yesterday, which meant that Nakie's subjects would be the women. . . .

Now, how did he remember all this? Until a moment ago, he had forgotten the two little figures completely. But now, as soon as he saw them, he remembered everything. It was as if he never had forgotten.

"Hello," said Karn.

"Good morning, Harry," Nakie said.

The hell with this, Harry thought. *Either I'm going crazy or I'll put a stop to this right now.*

He ran out of his office and into the reception room. He did not stop running until he reached Miss White's desk.

She looked at him queerly. "Yes, Mr. Carter?"

"What do you mean, yes?"

"I mean . . . Mr. Carter, didn't you want anything? I mean, the way you came running out here."

Harry shook his head. "No. No, I didn't want anything." But he *did* want something, he knew that. Only he could not remember what it was. He had come running out of his office with some purpose in mind, but now he did not know what it was. Odd . . .

He went back inside and closed the door.

Nakie said: "Where have you been? After all, we expect to be admired all the time, not just once in a while. Actually, it does not bother me, because I will have the ones with the outthrust hillocks, but I'm thinking of my brother Karn."

Karn scowled. "Yes. You're thinking of me. That's a laugh. That's why you give me the oafs for subjects. How I wish you were the younger brother, just once . . ."

"But I'm not," said Nakie. "And now I'm trying to do my best for you."

Harry remembered everything now, but he did not know why he had forgotten a moment before.

"Harry," Nakie said, "don't you think we're wonderful?"

Harry didn't want them to bother him. He could go crazy if they bothered him. "Yes," he said absently. "You're wonderful. Terribly, terribly wonderful. Now, will you leave me alone?"

It was a mistake. "See?" Nakie said. "I knew he'd realize how wonderful we are. It took time because he's something of an oaf. But now he knows we're wonderful, and he will make a good subject for you, Karn."

Karn squealed delightedly, lowering his small pink body from the table. "I will make him my prime minister," Karn said, and he leaned affectionately against Harry's calf, purring like a cat.

"He realizes I'm wonderful," Karn said dreamily.

Nakie nodded. "You're right. And now, why don't you show him that we can be grateful rulers?"

"You're right. I forgot." Karn reached into his pocket and took out a wristwatch. It was a dainty, feminine thing—and Harry recognized it at once.

"That's Miss White's!" he gasped. "You took Miss White's wristwatch." Harry would know it anywhere—it had been given to Miss White by her fiancé last week, and she had shown it to everybody in the office.

"Of course I took it." Karn's voice was indignant. "A subject should not question the gifts of his ruler. Here, I give it to you."

"Be happy with it," Nakie said.

Harry took the watch and walked into the reception room.

"Umm, Miss White . . ."

He had wanted to tell her something. But now he could not remember what it was. In his hands he held her watch, and that was odd. He said: "I have your watch, Miss White . . ."

She chewed her gum furiously. "Why. *Mr. Carter* . . . My watch was missing and I didn't know where it was. *Mr. Carter* . . ."

"I found it in my office," he said lamely. He knew that was not quite right, but it was all he could remember. There was something more . . . His face reddened and he gave the watch to Miss White. He was aware that she gazed at him thoughtfully as he reentered his office.

"You're an ungrateful oaf," Nakie criticized him. "Why didn't you keep our gift?"

At once, Harry remembered. He remembered everything. And now he knew that each time the little creatures were out of sight, he'd forget everything once again—only to remember it as soon as he saw them. It was maddening.

"You can't go around stealing things like that," he said. "There are laws against it."

Karn snorted. "A sovereign ruler makes his own laws."

"Don't be so impetuous," Nakie frowned. "We have to please our subjects. If he thinks we should not do that, then we won't."

"Well, I don't know," Karn said. And then he began to empty his pockets. "But I certainly think it's silly."

On the floor at Harry's feet he placed a broach, two pairs of earrings, another watch, a pair of cuff-links, and an atomizer.

Harry blanched. "Where the devil did you get those?"

"They're for you," Karn brightened. "Of course, if you really don't want them . . ."

"I don't," Harry assured him.

"Well, perhaps the one with the outthrust hillocks will like them better . . ."

"She won't. So you just take them back where you got them."

"Careful," Karn warned. "Careful. I am your ruler, I own half of this universe, and you are not to talk to me like that."

Nakie said, "Don't be cross with him, or he won't think you're wonderful. The other one thinks I'm wonderful."

"Yes," said Karn. "If you really feel I should take these little items back . . ."

"You should," said Harry.

"And then will you think I'm wonderful?"

Harry nodded. "I'd know it."

Karn braced himself, and pulled the door open half a foot. Then Nakie gave him the jewelry, and he put it carefully in his pocket. He walked out through the reception room.

Miss White screamed. "It's one of them! Now I remember what happened to my watch." And then she bolted for Harry's office, but Nakie had climbed down behind the desk, and he was hiding there.

"Mr. Carter—" Miss White began.

"Yes?"

Her jaw bobbed up and down as she chewed her gum, and just this once, Harry found himself enjoying the two little men. Miss White seemed so confused. "I forget what I was going to say," she told him, and she walked back out into the reception room.

Harry smiled. He knew this wasn't right. He should not be enjoying this. But, at the same time, he realized that he would allow himself to enjoy it just this once, and that was all. He could see Nakie hiding behind the desk, and he called after Miss White:

"It probably wasn't important. Forget about it."

soon, the office began to fill, and Harry's day was a mad one. People would come in to visit him, and they would see Nakie. Harry would assure them he was only a clever toy, and the fact that Nakie moved and talked disturbed them endlessly. But the little blue man certainly was a clever diversion, and Harry sold acreage to every man on his appointment schedule that day.

Then, of course, when a customer would leave, he'd forget all about Nakie. Completely and positively. He would not know Nakie existed.

"You're good for business," Harry told the little blue man once, when they were alone.

"Nakie is wonderful," Nakie said, laughing. "I knew you would realize it sooner or later. Karn, of course, is something of a problem, but then, in

his own way, he is wonderful too. Not nearly as wonderful as me, of course—but then, he takes after our Mother.”

“What do you mean, he’s a problem?”

“Well, you saw the way he takes things. He likes to take things. But he does it to please his subjects.”

In spite of himself, Harry was interested. “How the devil can he take things like that without people noticing?”

“Oh, they notice all right. But then, there’s that peculiar property we have here in this spatial plane—as soon as we’re gone, you forget all about us. It’s as if we never existed. Karn takes something, and someone sees him take it. Then Karn disappears, and someone only remembers that the item is missing. I told you Karn was wonderful.”

“Wonderful . . .” Harry repeated, but then another customer came into his office, and he was busy explaining the clever gadget, Nakie, which the man would forget anyway, as soon as he was gone. . . .

HARRY was glad when the day was over. This had been the first crisp day of autumn, and it had been cool. But Harry was sweating. He said good night to Mr. Chambers, to Felix, and to Miss White, and then he went out to the elevator. He saw Nakie duck away ahead of him and start down the stairs. Nakie would probably go home by himself, his own way, and beat Harry there.

Harry said hello to the elevator operator. He had had an unusual day today. He did not know why, it was something intangible, but it had been an unusual day. If he could remember the details, he would tell Julie when he got home. She’d be interested. That was one of the many reasons he loved Julie. She was really, genuinely interested in everything he did.

“Julie, oh Julie!” he called as he came up the walk.

Julie met him at the door. Nakie clung to one of her legs, and Karn’s pink form clung to the other.

“Hello, dear,” Harry said.

“Hi. Our guests are back. Odd that we should have forgotten all about them last night . . .”

It wasn’t odd at all, but Harry didn’t bother explaining to her. There was something more important.

“Karn?”

“Yes, my subject?”

“Did you return those items to their owners?”

“Oh, now, I didn’t think you were really serious.”

“He was serious,” Nakie said.

Karn smiled. "Well, I have to please my subjects. In that case, I'll return the items."

He went inside and returned in a moment with a big sack. He took out the broach, the two pairs of earrings, the watch, the pair of cuff-links, and the atomizer. The sack was still filled with jewelry.

"Where did you get all that?" Harry said slowly. This was all too unreal for him to be angry. He said it like you might say it to a playful child.

"Oh, that. I know. I know. I'm wonderful. I took it afterwards . . ."

"Well, return that, too."

"I thought you just wanted me to return what I took before."

"You just go right out and return everything!"

Julie said, "Harry. Don't holler at him. He's so cute."

"Well, cute or not, he returns all that stuff. We'd get in trouble, Julie . . ."

Karn shrugged. "Okay, if you want it that way. You're just lucky I have a wonderful memory. But you're certainly the most ungrateful subject I ever had. Isn't he, Nakie?"

Nakie nodded indifferently, and Karn replaced everything in the sack. Then he swung the sack up and over one of his shoulders, and he trudged out the door. "I'll be back . . ." he called out to them.

"That," said Harry, "is what I was afraid of."

They sat in the living-room, Harry, Julie, and Nakie.

"I'm afraid he'll never learn," Nakie said. "He's been gone for two hours, and you can be sure he's returned just about everything by now. But he'll take more, later. That's the way Karn is. He's wonderful—but he's not as wonderful as I, because he takes things."

Harry was thinking. This could explain so much. Suppose there had been other visitations out of Nakie's realm? Beings would come—little blue men or little pink men—and they would take what they wanted. Then, when they departed, people would only remember that something was missing. They would forget utterly the little blue men and the little pink men. Or sometimes, a faint recollection might remain, as Harry had remembered the name Nakie the night before. Just a faint recollection, and something would be missing, or some mischief would have been done. And that could explain the legends of the goblins, the elves, the gnomes—even something more scientific like the poltergeists of psychic phenomena. Or gremlins—it even could explain gremlins . . .

". . . so," Nakie was saying, "Karn will never change. He likes to take things . . . I certainly hope it does not get you into trouble, because he will use this house, the doorway into our realm, as his storage place . . ."

Karn had returned, without his sack. "So what if it gets them into

trouble? We're wonderful, and it will be worth it to them just so long as we permit them the pleasure of our company."

"Naturally, he is right," said Nakie.

Harry frowned. So they thought they were wonderful. They lived it, they breathed it—and others had to think so too. Impossibly vain little creatures . . . and Harry suddenly had an idea, a wild idea. They could get him into trouble; Karn would, soon. He'd go out on another raid, the egotistical little kleptomaniac, and Harry would be blamed . . .

Harry said, "You are *not* wonderful."

Nakie looked up, startled. "What?"

"I said, you are not wonderful. You stink, both of you. You're not wonderful at all. What's more, I don't even like you."

Karn looked shocked. "Careful. Careful, I will become angry."

"So, get angry. Go ahead and rant. Scream, tear your stupid pink hair. On you it would look good." Harry hoped he was right. He'd have this one chance, and he did not want to make a mistake.

Karn was furious. He jumped up and down. He reached into his pocket and took out a little silver cone. It could have been a tiny gun of some sort.

Harry laughed, but his throat was dry. "Go ahead. If that's a gun, shoot me. Try to show your superiority, you egotistical little whelp. Go ahead."

"Careful," Karn warned, and his little pink finger tightened on the trigger of his silver cone.

"Hah! I dare you to shoot. Wonderful, 'my foot. You're awful . . ."

Karn began to squeeze the trigger, but Nakie reached out and stopped him. "They don't like us, my brother."

"No. They don't think we're wonderful."

"I know. Well, it was an experiment, and it did not work." Nakie's voice was weary. "A second-stage culture, after all, is an awfully primitive one. What can you expect?"

"Nothing, I guess. But the one with the outthrust hillocks thought we were wonderful."

Nakie shook his head. "That was only temporary. The other type is dominant. He would have changed her mind. They are just too primitive to appreciate us. We will tell papa. This universe is not for us. It is not for any of our kind. Primitive savages . . ."

Nakie stopped talking. He reached into his pocket and took out the little golden horn which Harry had seen yesterday. It could have been a miniature coronet. Nakie put it to his lips and then he began to blow. Harry had never before heard music like this—it was weird and it was

beautiful, and he knew he could never hope to remember it—and then, abruptly, it faded into a range which was too high for him to hear.

Karn shook his head. "We are wonderful and we wanted to own this universe for your own good, but you just did not appreciate us. Perhaps in a few thousand years, when your people have matured . . ."

Nakie still blew on the golden horn, but no sound came. Then, slowly, the little blue man and the little pink man began to shimmer. They shimmered for a while and for a brief instant Harry thought he heard the music again. The shimmering pink figure and the shimmering blue figure trembled, became transparent. Less than transparent. They disappeared. . .

"What the heck are we doing out here on the lawn?" Harry said.

"I don't know, honey, but I'm hungry."

Harry patted his wife's backside affectionately. "Well, scoot inside and make dinner. That's why I married you. . . ."

Julie laughed as she ran inside. "You just think you're wonderful," she said.



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The Call of the Black Lagoon

by CHARLES L. HARNESS

JANUARY 5. *The Manor*. I peered through the quaint, leaded window of that ancient inn, across leagues of dreary, snowlocked moorland, and beheld Blackheath Manor.

There it stood—sinister and yet enticing; evil and yet alluring; a ruin whose sole remaining tower, like the paw of some nameless beast, stood out, sharp violet-black against the blurred saffron of the western sky.

"It calls to me!" I cried.

This I said to the tipplers that sprawled in the tap of the inn—rude, provincial men, yet with faces as sharp as their own gabled roofs. How they shrank from me! One even dropped his tankard of ale.

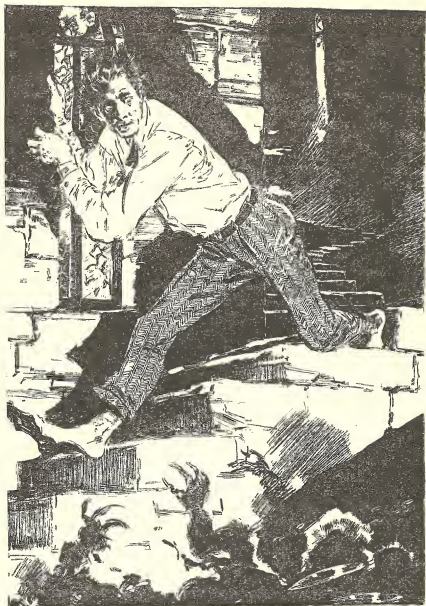
They sought to stay me, clutching my shoulder with their beefy hands, telling me of the things that ruled the ancient pile and of the fate that awaited all intruders. Thus croaked rustics who fear to look into an owl's nest; thus they chattered to me—Alan Thirwall—who would translate Pontoul!

So I made haste to leave the revelers lest they might seek by force to stay me. For my work must not delay—the world awaits it!

I struck out across the moor and soon had reduced the village to a long silvery blur which stabbed the deepening twilight with icy points of flame. The dreary howling of dogs floated after me like a funeral dirge. I must have looked like a gnome as I struggled through the powdery drifts, bending low under the weight of my pack.

I was dragging my knapsack laboriously through the hissing snow when at last, near dawn, I toiled up a low hummock and threw myself gasping upon its crest.

There, through an obscuring mist of moonlight, I stared into a hollow, out of which swarmed the gnarled trunks of skeleton trees. From the tall-



est cluster, as though from the clenched fingers of a bony hand, shot the tower which had so allured me.

It seemed to suggest the very spirit of decay, flanked as it was by piles of shattered masonry, with its gaunt walls smothered in ivy, with its glowering casements and with its blurred skyline of crumbling turrets and broken chimneys. A glimmer amid the trees caught my attention. It came from the dark and frozen surface of a nearby lagoon. As I gazed upon it, there came faintly to my ears a sharp, cracking sound.

I stumbled down a narrow, snowheaped path, lurched under the fallen arch of the gatehouse, and finally threw down my pack before a great Gothic portal. I put my shoulder to the door; it held fast. I lunged, and this time it burst open with a splintering crash, sending me sprawling into a cold, black hall.

A brief rummaging in my pack yielded a candle stub, whose uneasy flame soon showed me the newel stair. I crept slowly up the crumbling steps, my shadow bobbing irresolutely behind me. The chamber nearest the roof was my destination. The first object that met my gaze as I thrust open the screeching door was a shattered tabouret. I broke it up still more and soon had a cheerful blaze crackling up the chimney throat.

A few moments before, I replenished the fire with half an oaken cabinet, but the room is still rather chilly. It must be made more comfortable; likewise a store of fuel must be located.

Hark! Again comes that sharp, snapping sound. I heard it even above the roaring of the flames. Doubtless a branch was broken under its weight of snow.

Sprawled in the corner is an ancient and exceedingly unsymmetrical four-poster. It is festooned with cobwebs and gives forth a musty smell, but to me it is more enticing than the fabled bed of Sardanapalus. I shall resist its appeal no longer . . .

Same day, later.—Have made my room somewhat more habitable. The single lanceted window is very picturesque but, unfortunately, most of its quaint pattern glass has disappeared and, as a consequence, the wind whistles in keenly. I immediately began stuffing the apertures with strips torn from the moldering tapestries and from the rotting valances of the bed.

As I busied myself with this operation, a flash of light caught my eye. Upon looking down, I again saw the frozen lagoon. I stared at it for some moments, noting in particular the thin cracks that zigzagged from one back to the other—an odd thing surely; it seemed almost as though something had been thumping the ice from below.

January 6.—I have been prying into the nooks and corners of this ancient pile, principally for the utilitarian purpose of gathering fuel for my fire.

I feel now that I can face the winter with equanimity. The ceiling of the hall gallery collapsed generations ago and its shattered joints, beams, and rafters will undoubtedly prove an apt substitute for the oaken faggots piled on the hearth in times of yore. Also, on the lower steps of the newel stair, I observed a litter of torn manuscripts, which, if thoroughly dried, should serve admirably for tinder.

January 8.—Have spent some profitable hours in spite of the dreariness of this ruined place. Indeed, its very desolation seemed to stimulate me; images fairly rioted through my brain, and inflection and syntax did not present their usual pitfalls. I am now but four ballades from the end of the "Greater Testament."

How the layman will marvel at the verve and vitality of my lines! How the scholar will admire the delicate shading of each word; the masterly inflection of each metrical unit! And how I shall laugh at those men who asked me questions! But no, I must not laugh—not even here.

January 9.—I feel strangely depressed tonight. Perhaps it is the dreary carnival of sounds that has made me so. There is the rattling of the spectral trees; the plaintive cry of some passing curlew; the irregular mouselike rustle of the ivy; the whistle of the wind around the shattered chimney-pots—all of which, instead of assuaging the loneliness, seemed only to have intensified it, until now I half expect to see the gloom materialize and drip like water from the musty walls.

January 10.—A bitterly fatiguing day, and yet withal satisfactory. If I could only allay that queer, indefinable sense of uneasiness!

I was awakened twice early this morning by that sharp cracking sound, which evidently comes from the direction of the lagoon.

However, my work is progressing admirably. The end of the "Greater Testament" is now but two ballades away.

January 11.—I must report an odd incident today.

Spent a restless night, due to vague dreams whose significance I cannot recall, except that they were of a disagreeable nature. Hoping that the exercise would clear the cobwebs from my brain, I decided to make a thorough investigation of the grounds.

It was well that everything was shrouded by the snow, for otherwise the dreariness of the prospect would have been greatly increased. There were a number of gaunt, irregular hummocks whose walls gloomed through here and there in ugly splotches of gray. Feathery clumps and low, sprawling ridges of dazzling white afforded additional testimony to the ravages of time. The gatehouse was a gnarled, contorted ruin. Curiously enough, its shattered keystone, as it cropped up through the snow, seemed to point directly to the adjacent lagoon.

I did not need this lithoid hint, however, to draw my attention to the body of water, for it has fascinated me from the time I first peered through the trees and saw it glittering in the moonlight. Such an interest is indeed fantastic and I cannot account for it.

Incredible though it seems, the pool must be artificial, and moreover, of startling antiquity, for the thin line of mortared-retaining wall that gleams blackly above the ice has been worn to a pebblelike smoothness as though by the weathering received during the course of untold centuries. Strangely enough, there is no outlet.

The outline of the tarn bears a slight resemblance to the contour of a misshapen beast, the body of which stretches toward the gatehouse, while the head verges upon the great portal of the manor. At this latter point, the snow has become heaped in such a manner as to give an odd impression of steps leading into the lagoon. Or out of it. Absurd, of course.

The thin cracks in the ice have unbelievably multiplied, and now lace and interlace like a profusion of black cobwebs. In several places, segments of the frozen stuff had been thrust slightly upward. Doubtless here was the origin of those strange cracking sounds that had so impressed me.

While debating these questions, I crumbled a bit of mortar from an outjutting wall and idly tossed it toward the lagoon.

To my surprise, instead of ricocheting along the ice, it struck with a sharp clink and went *through*, hurling up a tiny spout of dark-colored water. And yet the air was cold; indeed so bitterly cold that I shivered in my heavy great-coat.

January 13, morning.—I have slept like a babe for the last two nights, and I am much elated in consequence. Even the frost-etchings on the window panes seem more beautiful than usual: they have formed into crisp, fernlike designs, interlaced with silvery whorls and spirals, and by their very delicacy seem to repel that obtrusive aura of desolation and decay. However, as the frostwork has usually blurred away by this hour, the air outside must be nipping indeed.

Same day, late afternoon.—The ice on the lagoon has *melted*! Only a few mimic floes remain, and these are fast dwindling away. This appears incredible in view of the piercing cold, and yet I must believe my eyes. A very curious smell, somewhat like the dampened fur of an animal, hangs faintly but perceptibly over the place. To the touch the water is warm and slightly oily; but its taste is so utterly vile that I see with regret that it can never substitute for melted snow.

The melting of the ice is a remarkable phenomenon and may be responsible for the return of my vague forebodings.

January 14.—I am progressing well indeed with my work, having had a fit of energy that enabled me to finish the concluding ballade of the "Greater Testament." Too weary to write more . . . if only it were not so desolate here.

January 15.—A rather singular thing occurred today. Shortly after dusk I was strolling past the lagoon, when suddenly I seemed to feel the glare of countless eyes. So real was the impression that I instinctively whirled around. I could see nothing save a slight ripple of the black waters, a tiny agitation as though something had just submerged. Can fish exist in such a place?

January 16.—Have accomplished little as I have been feeling drowsy all day.

I am writing these words by the wavering gleam of a brace of very ancient tapers. I uncovered a bundle of them in an oaken chest that lay in the ruined buttery. They are jet-black in hue and evidently—though of course in very attenuated form—had been designed to represent some repulsive beast. Its nature I cannot decipher, for the edges of the candles have been badly worn.

January 17.—I have just passed by the lagoon. Curiously enough, there are steps leading into the water. I wonder why?

January 18.—There must be rats in this dismal place. What they subsist upon I don't profess to know. And yet their presence seems undeniable. Last night, just before retiring, I opened the door to get a breath of air and heard quite distinctly a faint, stealthy rustling, apparently coming from the stairs below me, and sounding as though something were creeping over the litter of torn papers. The sound annoyed me out of all proportion to its volume, and after peering in vain into the gloom below, I yelled suddenly with all my might. The noises ceased abruptly—in fact too abruptly, for there was none of the scurrying and scampering that ordinary rats make when in full retreat.

Same day, later.—I thoroughly investigated the debris on the lower stairs, but could find nothing of a suspicious nature. Would rats have gnawed the moldering papers? I am not sufficiently acquainted with their habits to answer this, but I do know that there was no evidence of tooth marks or similar imprints.

However, there was an odd taint in the air. It was almost imperceptible, but still rank enough to arouse disagreeable memories. Where have I encountered it before? I think it must have been fairly recent.

January 19, before retiring.—I have been feeling depressed all day. Wholly unable to concentrate, I have flung ball after ball of wadded foolscap into the fire, watching each pellet melt away in a spurting crackle of

yellow flame. Why did I ever come to this desolate place? Now, especially in the dark, it seems to lie under the spell of some evil power. The moaning of those wasted trees; the booming of the wind among the shattered chimney pots; and the very rattling of the ancient casements seem but to accentuate this impression.

And the memory of that cry I heard an hour ago does nothing to counteract my unhappy presentiments. I heard the sound once: very, very faint it was, and so devilishly high-pitched that it set my teeth on edge. Widgeon, curlew, plover—what high-flying bird could have uttered it? Still, it seemed to come from below rather than from above, and for some obscure reason set me to thinking of those words of Bottomly: "A spirit calling in an old, old tongue."

January 20.—Another curious incident today. I was feeding my fire with debris collected from one of the ruined halls when a queer carving on one of the oaken blocks suddenly caught my eye. Evidently at one time it had been a decorative grotesque on the central ceiling beam. It had been carved into the semblance of some hideous beast, though indeed the features were now so woefully shattered as to defy exact analysis. However, it seemed to glare at me so evilly that I hurled it into the flames—and then carefully wiped my hands. Doubtless the same creature inspired both the candlesticks and this repulsive arabesque.

January 21.—It appears very strange that I have seen no rats here, especially in view of the fact that I can hear them so plainly.

Last night one of my pens fell from the *écritoire*, rolled jerkily over the uneven floor, and disappeared under the bottom of the portal. I rushed to retrieve it, and then, upon flinging open the door, I seemed to hear faintly, but distinctly, the sound of *cerie* footfalls pattering down the stairs. Again came that indefinable odor. This time, although the association is absurd, it reminded me of the smell of the lagoon. Snatching up my pen, I stepped back into the room. It is indeed a sad commentary upon the state of my nerves that I should feel uneasiness at these trivial events, and yet I made sure that the door was bolted before I retired.

January 22.—I ventured into the open air today and undoubtedly derived benefit from the exercise. The surface of the lagoon again drew my attention. Its inky waters are now splotted with irregular patches of foam, while adhering to each is an oily film of greenish-black slime, so repulsive as to suggest ages of corruption and decay—moral as well as physical. The same nauseous smell hung low like a mist over the place.

Curious fancies came unbidden to my mind as I shrank into the shelter of the doorway. From what foul abysmal spring do these waters trickle? How far do those crumbling steps descend beneath the surface? What is

their purpose? What holds sway over this buried world? But I could find no answer.

January 23.—Last night I again heard that unbearably shrill piping sound. This time, although the idea is absurd, it seemed almost to skirl out of the lagoon itself.

January 24.—Those creatures are not rats.

I worked until very late last night. The room was perfectly still except for the reedy scratching of my pen and an occasional crackle from the hearth. Then suddenly there came a queer scraping sound from the door, as though something were rubbing against the panels. It jarred slightly.

I leaped forward, wrenched open the portal, and saw—nothing. The stone landing was absolutely deserted. But as I peered into the engulfing blackness, I heard again very distinctly the sound of feet padding rapidly down the stairs. The same indescribable odor hung in the air—that sickening taint from the lagoon.

A few seconds later the scurrying stopped abruptly and there remained only silence, deep and intensive. I felt that the things were waiting for me in the darkness. It was with an odd feeling of disquietude that I returned to the warmth of my room.

January 26, before dawn.—As I scratch these words, a great blaze is roaring up the chimney, and *all* my remaining tapers are aglow.

I had worked until very late, and was nodding over the second of the minor ballades, when suddenly I saw vaguely out of the corner of my eye some darting object. Drowsily turning my head, I beheld something that made me lurch from my seat. It was not a hand, nor was it a paw, but rather a hideous suggestion of both: a bloated, shaggy stump that was thrust viciously under the bottom of the door, straining and rasping over the roughened floor. Again came that sickening smell of death and decay.

I leaped to my feet. It would take but an instant to spring to the portal and wrench it open. Then, while I hesitated, the thought came to me: this time they will not retreat.

As I stared like a man in a nauseous dream, there came again the faint mad strains of that awful piping. The groping stump recoiled like a black flash; there was a sharp scuffling, and then the creatures went yowling down the stairs. Fainter and fainter grew their cries until at last they disappeared in a series of thin, sullen splashes.

Same day, later.—My confidence is fast returning. As I turn over the event calmly and rationally in my mind, it seems that it could have been a hallucination—probably the tag end of some waking dream. Undoubtedly I have been working too hard; I must keep more reasonable hours.

January 27.—I have just witnessed a trivial incident, and yet one which

has abnormally depressed me. An hour ago, as I approached the window, a slight vibration caught my eye. Upon investigating, I saw that a small insect had become entangled in a spider's web. The tiny creature fluttered desperately, but to no avail; each fevered lunge only tightened the threads. Deep within its burrow the spider watched the diminishing struggles of its prey. When at last the web gave only an occasional twitch, there came a flash of jet across the silvery strands, and slowly the spider dragged the helpless insect into its lair.

January 28, evening.—My hand trembles so that I can scarcely clutch the pen.

I had reasoned with myself until I was wholly convinced that my recent experiences were due to shattered nerves and nothing more, that the loneliness of the place was insidiously destroying my power of will. So, in an effort to get a firmer grasp on reality, and in search of a temporary change of scenery, I took a long walk across the moor, tramping through the clinging drifts until a succession of healthy aches and pains swept away all my morbid fancies. The air was cold and pure; the snow seemed like a mantle of ermine. Here there was no unhealthy decay—physical or otherwise.

A red gleam appeared in the distance. It was the village that I had so abruptly quitted—centuries ago, it seemed. As I peered over the frosty moor, a fit of homesickness suddenly engulfed me. Lavender-scented sheets; a brimming flagon of wine, even a friendly clasp on the shoulder—all these lay within my reach. I took a hesitant step forward.

But no! With Pontou on the verge of completion, such a cowardly retreat was unthinkable. As I stumbled drearily away, it seemed that the landscape had suddenly darkened: there was a dull leaded look on the sky, and ragged gray clouds appeared to press on the moor.

It was dusk when I reached the manor. Looming from its bed of gloomy trees, it lured me on with a basilisk stare.

The impression grew that something was watching me.

I had just drawn even with the lagoon when, again struck by my presentiment, I gazed through the gathering murk, hard at the tower crest, noting the gaunt outline of the broken chimney shafts; and coming lower, the bulge of the snow-covered ivy over the string-course; and, still lower, the glaring lanceted window of my own room. Then, directly beneath this, perched on the gaping, snowheaped sill of the casement that lit the stairs, I saw what appeared to be a great wet shadow. I felt the hair rise at the nape of my neck as I noted a three-dimensional *unevenness* in the black silhouette.

The shadowy eyes seemed to burn into mine, and they seemed to be

green—but not the chaste glittering green of the emerald or beryl. Rather they seemed to smolder with a cold, slimy green that suggested cons of incalculable evil.

I sprang forward with a wild cry and dashed up the spiral stairs until I reached the window. It was empty.

January 29.—Last night I dreamed that something watched me as I slept. When I awoke this morning, the door of my room was slightly ajar. I am ready to swear that I locked and double-locked it before retiring. That ghastly smell from the lagoon is quite perceptible.

January 31.—This happened hours ago, but I had to wait for my nerves to steady so that I might grasp a pen.

It seemed that I had no sooner fallen asleep when a deluge of hideous dreams engulfed me. A legion of green eyes swirled about me, and looming titanicly above them was a formless shadow that piped endlessly in a thin unbearable key. All were enticing me to do some horrid, nameless thing. I took a few hesitant steps—and then a cold breath of air swept over me, and I awoke.

I stood shivering upon the second landing of the stairs. There below, half buried in the gloom, crouched something that beckoned to me. With a wild screech I scurried up the steps, leaped into my room, and slammed the door with a crash that shook the embers on the hearth.

February 2, midnight.—Have been sleeping in the daytime. I do not dare close my eyes after dusk. Still, I have heard nothing at the portal. On the contrary, all has been as quiet as the tomb.

February 4, 3 A.M.—If my mind slips much more . . .

This morning, shortly after midnight, a sudden fit of drowsiness swept over me. I strode furiously about the room, hoping in this manner to clear my brain, but it was to no avail. My vision blurred; the room whirled about me, and I pitched forward upon the bed like a stone.

I dreamed again, and my dream was this: I was stealing softly along a damp narrow way, whose walls loomed grim above me. There was something that glided beside me; now it rubbed against my legs; now it stretched up and nuzzled my hand. "It is a cat," I thought, and I stooped to caress it. In slow, bobbing undulations its head came nearer and nearer to my own. I felt its breath upon my face. It was chill—so strangely chill that I shuddered and awoke.

I lay sprawled on the first landing of the stairs. It was deathly cold and intensely still. Moonlight filtered through the narrow embrasure and cast a faint pattern upon the floor. Something stirred in my arms. I looked down, and—

I realize now that I howled madly as I bounded up the stairs to my room.

Translation or no translation, I now see that I must leave this place immediately.

Same day, afternoon.—God be praised! On with Pontoul! Here is an event that may restore my tottering sanity. I have a guest, or rather two—a Dr. Dunkirk and his man Skaggs. They straggled in an hour ago, coming from the west and thus did not pass through the village.

Even in this short time, their presence has acted upon me as a wholesome tonic. In fact, so far did I forget my troubles that I was sorely tempted to laugh when the doctor, who is an antiquary, blinked owlshly at me over his thick-lensed spectacles and announced in a deep, rumbling voice that he had thought Blackheath Manor untenanted, but if I should give him permission to examine the ancient masonry inclosing the lagoon (of which he had heard vague but tantalizing reports), I should unquestionably aid in furthering an impressive contribution to science. Doubtless, in common with the learned Mr. Simpkinson of *Ingoldsby* he has written a brochure on the earliest application of gilding to gingerbread.

The servant was less loquacious.

"By Goles!" I heard him growl as he threw down his packs, "The 'Doc' 'as dragged me to many a bloody sink, 'e 'as, but never to such a one as this 'ere—strike me dead!"

I directed them to the ground chamber of the tower—the only habitable room beside my own.

February 5, dawn.—A most uncomfortable night. Wedged a thin slab of oak beneath the door; thrust wadded balls of cloth into my ears, and kept myself awake by sharp stabs of my pen. I saw the door vibrate slightly several times.

Same day, later.—As I write this, I can see both the doctor and his man inspecting the walls of the lagoon. The former is busily tapping the ancient stones with a geologist's hammer. His fat chubby figure, now being much foreshortened, looks almost like a huge, tweed-covered ball. He jerks up his head and I can see the flash of his great rabbit-like teeth as he booms out a command to Skaggs.

This worthy scurries up with a small magnifying glass, which his master snatches out of his hand. Seen from this height, especially in view of his rounded shoulders and the flicker of his beady eyes, Skaggs gives one the impression of a sleek oily rat.

Each has a handkerchief bound tightly over his nostrils—a fact that surprises me very much indeed, as I thought that the smell of the lagoon had disappeared. It has not troubled me for days.

I must hide my hallucinations from the doctor and his man. Even yesterday they seemed constantly glancing at me.

February 6.—Dunkirk has the effrontery to state that he has never heard of Pontoul! He not only made a spectacle of his lamentable ignorance, but later, when he and his man were working near the gatehouse, I happened to glance at them from the doorway of the tower and distinctly saw the doctor blink slyly over his spectacles at Skaggs, who in return slowly drooped his left eyelid and tapped his forehead in a peculiar way.

Their attitude has completely dispelled any idea I ever had of leaving this place. They will see; they will see.

February 7, late afternoon.—I have just passed through a harrowing experience. It may have been due to general debility or to an acute nervous attack, but it now seems to me that I acted entirely without my own consent or volition.

Last night the antiquary puffed up the stairs to my room to honor me with a visit. Directing him to the only chair—a groaning contrivance of splintered oak—I began to build up the fire. He stopped me with a wave of his pudgy hand.

"Egad, man!" he roared, dabbing at his fat jowls with a cambric handkerchief, "you could roast an ox in here now. Curst if I see how you bear it!"

For some reason I hastened to change the subject.

"What luck with the lagoon?"

The doctor's handkerchief abruptly ceased its weaving amid the red, glistening folds of his bull-like neck.

"Very little, sir, very little indeed!" he bellowed, tossing the dampened wad of cambric into the fire. "The masonry is very ancient—clearly antedates the Celtic era by many centuries. The smell, however, is like a sewer—purely natural causes, you understand—but still it hinders investigation. In fact, it is so damnably vile that it reminds me . . ."

Here he gave vent to a roar of laughter and slapped his fat thigh. "Are you acquainted with Elferd's *Illustrata*?"

I was tempted to jam my fingers into my ears, but I merely shook my head, feeling all the while a painful sense of uneasiness.

"Elferd was a monk of the Cluniac order," rumbled the antiquary, glancing at me sharply, "a droll charlatan who, according to Parker's *Anelecta*, flourished at the time of the second Henry. Between his extended bouts with roast capons and stoups of double ale, he found time to write his *Britannica Illustrata*, ostensibly a natural history, but which is now considered nothing more than an extravagant collection of threnes and folk-tales.

"Its high point is a so-called translation which the unblushing Elferd claims to have made from a series of mystic runes of great antiquity. This

is the story of an elemental, a demon of incredible malignancy, which, like the 'hatif' of the Arabs, is never seen, but which dwells in a deep, vile-smelling sink, which is called a 'poison-pool' because of its depraving, brutalizing odor."

The doctor's voice seemed to boom directly into my eardrums. I had a mad desire to scream.

"This evil entity," continued the antiquary, flashing me another of his sharp looks, "holds sway over a pack of strange creatures which, like the popular conception of the cobras of a snake-charmer, are controlled by a high devilish piping.

"At this point Elferd probably stimulated his imagination with an extra bottle of Malmsey, for he declares that these creatures are sent forth to entice new recruits, and to incite them to . . ."

Here my brain must have burst its bounds, for I recall that I pirouetted with strange gliding motions and fairly rocked with peals of ghastly laughter. Then a black cloud swirled about me.

When I returned to consciousness it was to find myself in bed, with the sun beating in cheerily at the window. The red face of the doctor beamed over me. Noting the drawn look in his eyes, I stared at him inquiringly.

The ratlike Skaggs darted into the room just in time to catch my glance.

"'E nursed 'ee like a babby, 'e did," the fellow squeaked resentfully, "eight 'ours by Goles, and 'e's not left this 'ere room."

The doctor silenced him with a look.

"I have been expecting this," came his booming voice as he turned to me. "It is that cursed lagoon—vapors, exhalations, you know, tend to produce unhealthy illusions. Malnutrition too, but chiefly that noisome pool of water. By Gad! The place should be destroyed!"

"What did I say?"

"You raved like a lunatic," replied the antiquary, pressing a medicinal draught to my lips, "for which I hold myself largely responsible. My account of the legendary demon of the 'poison-pool' must have excited you tremendously." He concluded with a cheery laugh: "And now, my dear sir, strive to banish all these morbid fancies, and I'll warrant that you shall soon be on the high road to recovery."

February 8, morning.—Feel none the worse for my recent attack. And to my surprise, I experienced no difficulty last night, even though I slept for several hours. Perhaps I am indeed on "the high road to recovery."

Same day, late evening.—Shortly before dusk I descended the stairs without difficulty and, upon passing the open door of the antiquary's room, a faint glimmer of light caught my eye. I stepped softly across the threshold and discovered that the gleam came from a small mirror which the doctor had placed by the window.

Actuated by a sudden impulse, I peered into its crystal depths. A face glared back at me: it was long, narrow, and abnormally lean, and it was fringed with a thick stubble of beard. A mane of dank, black hair, all tangled into elf-locks and shot here and there with jagged blue lights, tumbled well over the pointed ears. The lips were thin and pallid; they were edged with a sharp line of scum. To complete the picture, narrowed green eyes smoldered from the depths of cavernous sockets.

I shrank back, hardly able to believe the face was my own. Those eyes . . .

At this moment my reflections were interrupted by a loud hail from the doctor.

Rushing to the entrance portal, I stared out into the gathering murk. All the east was shrouded in a dim blackness and, while I gazed, a great cloud began to spread over the sky.

Two figures loomed before me, each of whom had a handkerchief clapped to his nose. The nearer one beckoned to me with his free hand; it was the antiquary.

"This air would corrupt a saint!" he bellowed. "Curst if I see how you bear it, Thirwall—fatigue of the olfactory nerves, no doubt. I say the sink should be destroyed. It is vile—utterly vile—a blot in the fair scutcheon of nature. Look! This gas is what I wanted to show you—I fancy it lies at the root of all your troubles."

The thin coating of slime upon the inky waters rippled and quivered like a layer of black jelly. It was stabbed incessantly by bubbles filled with a pale luminous gas that, upon contact with the air, ignited in dull spurts of greenish flame.

Green they were indeed—those slimy bubbles—piercing the black scum, blinking into the night . . . green like the eyes . . . God! They *were* the eyes of those nameless creatures, inciting, alluring, tempting me to—

"Then destroy the hell-hole!" I cried, burying my face in my hands. "Blot it out, blast it to rubble, before it is too late . . . !"

They led me up the winding stairs to my chamber, and the doctor's voice seemed to boom through the air like thunder as he patted my shoulder and said, "Be brave, sir, be brave. There remains hope, yet with a condition. Your hallucinations are so vividly associated with the lagoon that I am convinced that they will cease only with the destruction of this body.

"Therefore Skaggs is leaving tomorrow for the nearest city for black powder and fulminate. A few charges lodged beneath the gatehouse will topple the whole affair very neatly into the pool. Then, of course, you must return with us—this place is not fit for a human being."

Same day, before retiring.—Still, it would indeed be a pity to destroy

the lagoon. Its black waters so aptly symbolize death; its green bubbles so fittingly represent degeneracy and decay. A light snow is falling now. Perhaps . . . Skaggs will be unable to leave on the morrow.

February 9, dawn.—I am drowsy and strangely weary. Dreamed again last night—a jumbled chaotic vision in which I seemed to hear shrieks from some one running in front of me. And then a sound like a heavy splash, followed by intense silence.

Same day, later.—Skaggs has disappeared!

"This thrice damned pool has frightened him away!" stormed the doctor, after we had searched for several hours. "Even left his wraps behind; bed was cold this morning when I awoke. I sleep like a log, or I should have heard him leave.

"Curse him! Or, rather, curse the lagoon! It seems to reek worse than ever this morning. It must be destroyed if I have to go for the powder myself! By Gad! And so I shall! I shall leave at sunrise tomorrow!"

What expression came into my eyes at these words? I do not know. Yet the antiquary stared at me intently and then impulsively clapped a fat hand upon my shoulder. "Sir, you are still unwell," he said blinking kindly at me. "Won't you stay with me tonight?"

But I shook off his hand and darted up the stairs. Upon once looking back, I saw his bulky figure loom through the shadows; he was still gazing after me, and slowly shaking his head.

So the doctor thinks he will leave in the morning.

February 10, dawn.—This will be my last entry, and I am as yet uncertain that I will be permitted to finish it. The morbid irony of this record passes understanding.

Last night, after completing the last of the *Minor Ballades*, I fell asleep and dreamed.

I saw a horde of repulsive creatures glide into a chamber where, on a bed lit up by the moon, lay the still form of a slumbering man. His face gleamed, and the great folds of fat under his chin undulated as he breathed.

Then, roused to fury by a thin, seductive piping, one of the living obscenities leaped from the horde—straight at the throat of the sleeping man. At that instant a black cloud swirled over the monstrous scene, and I awoke on my bed, trembling violently and drenched with perspiration.

I must see! I must go down to the doctor's room and see!

I saw.

There, sharp in the light of the moon, lay the doctor. His body was hideously convulsed; his eyes bulged almost from their sockets, and his throat was a black, spongy ooze: it had been slashed literally to ribbons.

Something dripped on my hand. Instinctively my gaze fell to the mirror. My jaws were dripping with blood.

At this moment, as I sit writing, I know that the door is opening behind me, that green eyes are flaming in the hallway, impatient, yet certain.

And harken to the piping, to that wild, enchanting pi . . .

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George wasn't an antique collector, but he discovered something very old and interesting in the dark little shop just the same. He found Agratha, and Agratha was as exciting a discovery as could be made by a boy. She was a talented witch. . . .

illustrator: Vincent Napoli

Agratha

by GLEN MALIN

GEORGE was rather tired coming back from grade school that hot spring afternoon. He usually took the long way home, around the outskirts of the town. That day, however, he decided to take the short-cut, and that was why he happened to be walking down the main street. Otherwise, he might never have seen it. Most of the shops lining the street were clean and shiny in the sun. Except one. He nearly passed it by in his anxiety to reach his cool house. But this shop, or what was once a shop, jutted out about a foot from the other shops. It was very old and its wood badly warped and almost charcoal black. The roof, and especially its eaves, hung at a curious lazy angle like frozen mosses. The windows were boarded up with equally blackened square planks that had been partially battered loose by countless winds.

To George the ancient shop was quite exciting, squeezed in tightly between those taller, newer structures. There was but one entrance: a tiny, wooden-handled door just large enough for a small man to enter.

George looked about the street, now lonely in the savage relentless sun. He played with the door-knob for a time, then put his small body behind it. It opened in small noisy jerks. The room was dark except for one of the battered planks that was emitting a sliver of light on the musty walls. When the boy got the old door completely open he could make out piles of junk heaped up to the ceiling; and the walls, the ceiling and the floor had a thick layer of dust sticking to them that made breathing exceedingly difficult.

"Close that door, child!" said a high, raucous voice. It seemed to be coming from the rear but George saw nothing move. He started toward the door.

"Don't go. I won't hurt you, child," it spoke softer. In a corner of the room he saw several candles light up. George drew a short breath and

closed the old door softly so it would not jar if he had to escape.

The candles came nearer to him, illuminating the wrinkled brown face and the shrunken, crooked body of an old, old woman. She placed a beautiful silver candelabra with its gleaming candles on a wooden box. The woman had a stiff black Mother-Hubbard dress which revealed her birdlike legs.

She jumped nimbly on a pile of junk and put on a black pointed hat which she produced miraculously from the air. "See," she smiled toothlessly, "See! I mean you no harm."

George stared up at the thin legs and the pencil-thin fingers that dangled to her knees.

"Now! Who are you, boy!"

"I—I'm George," he could not take his eyes off her.

She began to chuckle softly which made him want to run away and yet remained frozen there. "Well, you are quite a boy. And I—" she jumped off the junk pile as neatly as she got on—without so much as raising a grain of dust, "and I am Agratha!" She narrowed her eyes to long black gashes. "And you know who I am!" she cackled excitedly.

"Are you-a-a-witch?"

"A most wonderful boy. An excellent boy!" Agratha began dancing a jig around the candlelit table. Then she drew her face near George's. "You aren't afraid of Agratha, are you?"

"No," said George his knees still quivering.

"You are the first to see me—here," she gestured about the old room. "But much more wonderful, you believe in me." She reached out and plucked him by the chin. "My! You *are* a fine boy!"

He edged toward the door, eying the witch carefully. The candlelight pulsed as though it were the heart of the room.

"George! Would you like to see some tricks?" she barely whispered.

"Oh, yes!" he said.

"What would you like me to do?"

"Can you fly on a broomstick?"

"Oh, that is old hat!" Agratha screwed up her face in disgust. "Well, all right, but I can do better things than that." She ran to the far dark end of the room and began rummaging among the trash piles.

"Here 'tis," she croaked. Her step, as usual, was soundless on the floor when she returned. "Of course, I haven't done this in a long while and this room is not much for flying about in but . . ."

"Aren't you going to fly outside?" asked George.

"My no! If they saw me flying—outside—they wouldn't like it. Then they would come and tear my lovely house down." Agratha gave a deep,

wheezy sigh. "Then I wouldn't be able to do any tricks, eh?" She smiled and brushed George's hair with her bony fingers. And he smiled too.

"Now about the trick." Agratha set the broomstick on a forty-five-degree angle and drew a circle around it; then, getting astraddle it with her legs, she began rubbing the end of the stick with her fingers, saying these words: "Aroo-aroo come daddle; aroo-aroo come de—" she stopped, grinning as though she were embarrassed. "Oh, my! I forgot to batten down my clothing! Wouldn't I look indecent though!" Then she drew in the middle of her dress and made a knot so that the dress now resembled a strange species of short pants.

George got up close to see how she performed this but her fingers were too quick for him.

"Don't stand in that circle, George. You might be blown against the wall when I take off!"

He moved against a pile of trash near the gleaming candelabra.

Again she got on the stick and began rubbing it with her long, crooked fingers, saying: "Aroo-aroo come daddle; aroo-aroo come de; aroo-aroo come daddle de do; aroo-aroo—Excelsior!" And with that she ascended, heading for the ceiling. With a flip of her wrist she adroitly avoided the ceiling, with a subtle hunch of her right shoulder she missed a collision with the wall and glided into the farthest dark reaches of the room. George waited by the table, scarcely breathing, until Agratha reappeared. When she returned he was amazed at how quietly she floated. "I have it all under control now," she called with her hair streaming down her back in coarse strings. The broomstick traveled slower and slower and soon was fairly standing still in the musty air of the room.

"Well, boy," she whispered, seeing that George was impressed, "Now you see a broomstick in the hands of a master."

The stick floated up to the ceiling and gradually descended to the floor; not a bit of dust was stirred.

"Gosh!" was all he could say.

Agratha untied the knot in her dress and stuck the broomstick behind a pile of trash.

"Now! What else do you want me to do?"

"Can you make curses?"

Agratha opened her eyes wide so that she looked very serious. "You can't make curses on anyone unless they believe in you; now can you?"

"I guess not," said George.

"But if someone really did believe in me—like *you*—then I could lay a curse. I could curse good and proper."

He looked down at the floor.

Agratha put her hand on his shoulder and felt him tremble.

"I didn't mean to scare you, George. Why I wouldn't for the world lay a curse on you. Not for the world!" Her voice was as soft as she could make it. "You believe in me; you know I am really, truly a witch. You are my friend; the only one who has seen me for ages. I would not curse you—never!" She looked at him steadily until her eyes turned to black gashes on her head. "Unless you tell a single solitary soul about me. Only then would I curse you. But you would never tell anyone would you, George?"

"N-no," he said. He felt his spine sending quivering messages throughout his body. This was his secret.

The witch began to dance her jig around the candles until she got quite out of breath and threw herself on a trash pile. "Would you like to see a difficult trick? Would you like me to turn into a lizard?"

"I wish you would."

"Of course, I'll have to get my brewing pot and white wand." She dashed to the dark corner of the room and again began rummaging around a trash pile. Soon Agratha returned holding the handle of the battered black pot with the white wand sticking out of it.

She set the pot on the floor near the candlelit table and started stirring a thick mass with her wand. "This is a difficult trick but with a real audience I get *so* inspired!"

George moved nearer the pot, trying to see what was in it, but she pushed him gently away and continued stirring. Finally, when she had just the right mixture, she took the wand out of the pot and whirled it above her head in an arc. "Ah, that will do it! That will do it wonderfully well!" The mixture on the wand was a dark-green substance which had an inner radiance all its own. Agratha put some of it on each part of her body while she danced a jig around the pot and chanted: "One for my head, one for my feet, one for my body and give me heat; one for my hands, one for my arms, one for my legs and give me charms!" On the last word she jumped high in the air with her wand and left a green spot on the ceiling. Then Agratha tucked her left leg somewhere under her dress like a stork and began spinning on her right leg. Faster and faster she spun, swirling cold air all over the room. George had to button the top of his shirt. In a minute or two she was only a blur of speed, a whining sound in that old room. Then the spinning stopped and the black clothes collapsed and slowly sank to the floor, the cap on top of the neck of the blouse.

For some minutes George heard and saw nothing but the cadenced flickers of the candles against the rubbish and dusty walls. But on another glance at the clothes he saw the minute movements of a small struggling body under the black, lifeless skirt. Under the glare of the candles it

popped its whole body into view: a lizard; a plump sallow-bellied lizard.

George clapped his hands excitedly and jumped about the table. "You are wonderful, Agratha!" Agratha crawled under the table, licking her forked tongue out at him. When he approached her she dashed behind some tin cans. "Are you a real lizard? I wish you would come back to a witch again."

The lizard moved cautiously from behind the tin cans and darted quickly under the skirt. It moved throughout the clothing, even bobbing around the pointed cap. The cap began to rise and before George knew it the rest of the clothing was going up with it. The hissing sound of steam followed and there was Agratha all filled out again as a witch.

"Well, that was really something, eh?" She was quite out of breath.

"You were wonderful, Agratha," said George. "But where is your wand?"

She felt around her dress and finally produced the wand from under her sleeve. "That's the only weak point in the trick. Sometimes I have to spend hours looking for it." After carefully wiping off the green substance, she put the wand back in the pot.

"Now, George, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Well," he said looking down at the floor, "I—ah—would like to be a knight . . ."

"In shining armor, eh?" Agratha laughed.

She hopped over to the pot and began stirring the brew very slowly. After a few stirs she would examine the end of the wand to see if she had the right mixture, then would shake her head and continue stirring. When she had the right substance she flourished it over her head in an arc as she had done before.

"All right, George, you must stand up straight if you are going to be a good knight," Agratha said. Then she looked straight at him, "You will be a most wonderful knight!" Then she touched all the parts of his body with her wand, dancing and chanting as she had done when she turned into a lizard.

"Now close your eyes and turn around three times."

He did.

"Now open them," she said with a gleam in her eyes.

George was nearly blinded, at first, by the polish of his armor. It had real elbow and knee joints that clanked when he walked and a head gear that could slide down over the face for protection in an especially dangerous joust. He slid the face piece up on his helmet and examined himself carefully. "It's beautiful," he said. "But where is my mace?"

"Oh, yes! The mace! Stupid of me!" She touched one of his heavy gloves with her wand. "There 'tis!"

It was a fine mace with large silver spikes protruding from the heavy ball at the end of the handle. "Now I am a real knight!"

"You *are* a real knight, Sir George."

George clanked about the room brandishing the mace at likely targets or pummeling the stuffed gunny sacks with sure easy strokes. Soon he grew tired, for a mace is really quite a heavy weapon, and lay panting on an inner tube. Agratha watched him quietly, her gnarled brown hands dangling to her knees. When she wasn't active, Agratha assumed the shrunken pose of an old woman; her face a mass of jellied wrinkles.

"Agratha?" George asked. "I wish I could show—other people—I am a real knight."

Agratha shook her head. "They would only laugh at you."

George loosened his grip on the mace, letting it fall noiselessly to the floor. Two of the candles had been extinguished; the others flickered weakly against the blackness in the room.

"I guess it's late. I really have to go," said George, getting up from the inner tube.

"All right," Agratha sighed. She told him to close his eyes while she touched his armor with her wand. In a few seconds he was George, a boy, again.

"If you come again tomorrow I shall turn myself into a beautiful lady. That takes some doing, eh?" She laughed.

"That would be fun."

"Until tomorrow then," Agratha waved to him.

George started for the door.

"George!" He stopped. "Remember—not a word of this to a single living soul. I would not like that at all!"

He nodded and left her with her eyes staring blankly at him.

At supper that night George merely picked at his food while staring listlessly at his plate.

"Aren't you hungry, George?" asked his father.

"Huh?" he said as though his father did not exist.

His father lit a cigar and smiled. "I'll bet you had quite a day."

"What?" said George snapping back into full consciousness.

"What was it this time—a two-headed giant?"

George shook his head.

"A ghost?"

"N-no," he said, not looking at his father.

"Well, you must have seen something by the way you're behaving," his father said, reaching over for the newspaper. "Well, I guess it wasn't important."

George pursed his lips and glanced sharply up at his father, "It was so!"

"What?" said his father absently, engrossed in the paper.

"A witch—a witch! I saw one and—" he stopped. He felt the blood rushing from his face. It had slipped out; his secret had slipped out. His father remained placidly reading at the table while his cigar was dying on the plate.

He hadn't even heard him. That made George feel better. His mother was out in the kitchen scraping out some pots. She didn't hear him either. His heart returned to normal; no one had heard his secret. So it was really all right, although he did *mention* it out loud.

For some time George tossed fretfully in his bed until he had convinced himself that he hadn't really divulged the secret. Thoughts of the knight in armor, the broomstick, and the beautiful lady awaiting him tomorrow gradually lulled him to sleep.

When he awakened, the sun was shining directly in his eyes. The thoughts of the beautiful lady lingered with the confused fragments of other pleasurable dreams. The day was Saturday—a whole day of wonder with Agratha was ahead. He lay back in bed trying to recapture the rich feeling of fatigue. The words: "You *are* a real knight, Sir George," kept repeating in his ears. The sun was becoming intolerably hot with the bed covers wrapped about him. He crawled part way out of bed and reached for the bedpost for support. He could not reach it. It was immense, towering far above him. He looked at the ceiling and it was at least a hundred feet high at the pillow, and it was many times his size at the bed, and it too was immense. It was while looking at the bed that George found out what the trouble was. It was his body: stretched out before him, sleek and gray. He was a rat.





Suppose that all the dramatic violence that is human emotion were controlled by giant machines which one dark evening clacked to a grinding halt and died! John Jakes uses his skill with the written word to plunge us headlong into a world gone mad. . . .

illustrator: John Giunta

Checkmate Morning

by JOHN JAKES

A VOICE called him, shrill, insistent, pulling him from sleep with its intonations of terror. Gordon Dean rolled over dazedly, blinking. Kay, his wife, shook his shoulder fiercely. Dean squinted at her, seeing the fear on her face.

"Gordon! Gordon, get up!" She almost screamed.

"What time is it? What's wrong?"

"Dr. Berke just shot his wife."

"Wh . . . what?" Gordon sat bolt upright in bed.

"It's true," Kay said, her hands making little nervous motions. "I saw it. I was in the kitchen, starting breakfast, and I looked across to their back yard. Mrs. Berke came running out, and then the doctor. He had a pistol, and he shot her and then he ran away down the alley. She's still lying there."

Gordon was already out of bed and heading for the kitchen. "Old Dr. Berke . . . I can't imagine . . ." he said half aloud. "A doctor. One of the finest examples of emotional integration in the neighborhood." He halted at the kitchen window, gazing across to the next yard.

Mrs. Berke lay on the wet grass, looking wrinkled and deflated and old in her bathrobe. Blood was spreading slowly in a sticky red net through her gray hair. The morning sun burned down hot and fierce on her body.

Gordon shook his head, rubbing his eyes. "I . . . I don't understand it at all . . ."

Kay laughed jaggedly. "He went crazy. Only people aren't supposed to go crazy anymore. You and the others keep them from going crazy. You and the machines . . ."

"Dr. Berke," Gordon said again in wonderment. "He was so kind to everybody. I don't think I ever saw him lose his temper."

"There was a . . . well . . . a dead look on his face, as if all his reasons for being sane were gone. He just ran after and shot her."

Suddenly, a loud breaking noise sounded on the back porch, a noise of bottles shattering and glass tinkling down on stone. Gordon hurried to the back door and pulled it open.

The morning's milk supply lay on the back porch, dripping down onto the steps. The milkman had evidently flung the bottles against the wall of the house. Gordon looked up and saw him, driving his white truck down the alley. At the same time, he saw Gordon.

"Go to hell, goddam you," the milkman shouted, and made an obscene gesture.

"What in God's name . . ." Gordon began.

Kay pointed at the sky to the east over Brain City. A raw black banner of smoke curled into the bright blue morning sky. "Something's burning, Gordon. Something's on fire. There hasn't been a fire for . . . for thirty years or so."

"Integrated people don't start fires," Gordon breathed, "and they don't shoot their wives or break milk bottles. Goddam it, this may be really bad." He ran back toward the center of the house, grabbed the phone off its hook and dialed the Semantics Building.

When the central operator answered, Gordon heard a confusion of noise and shouting behind her voice.

"What was that again, sir?" the operator said.

"I said I want Steinkraus. Harry Steinkraus in the Department of Aeronautical Supply."

"There may be a delay," the operator said.

"Listen, if you can't get him for me, get another operator."

"I'm sorry, sir, but nearly half of the operators are gone. Everything's terribly confused, sir. The Machines . . . I . . ." Gordon listened to the sobs come fountaining forth. He breathed heavily, trying to be patient until the operator stopped crying.

"I'm sorry, sir," the operator said again. "It's just that . . ." She choked. "I'll get Mr. Steinkraus for you if I can."

There were several minutes in which various sounds filtered over the phone. Curses, confused clicks as circuits were broken in upon, whistling busy signals, and one loud explosive popping that sounded to Gordon like a phone unit blowing out. At last there was a long rattling click and, when it stopped, Gordon heard the familiar heavy voice.

"Steinkraus here. Make it short."

"Harry, this is Gordon Dean."

"Gordon! Jesus, man, get down here."

"What's going on?"

"The Machines stopped. This one, and the one in China. Both centers are out. People are going crazy."

That was all Gordon needed.

"I'll be there," he said, and slammed the phone down.

Kay stared at him quizzically. Gordon leaned against the phone stand, shaking his head, thinking of the implications of the statement. The well-ordered world of the twenty-first century was the complete result of the two great Semantic Integrating Machines which answered the problems of the world in correctly evaluated terms to the most specific detail, and laid the pattern for a sane civilization. And now the Machines . . . both of them . . . had broken down.

Gordon headed for the bedroom, dressing hastily. "I shouldn't have slept," he shouted. "I should have been up."

"You were tired, Gordon," Kay told him.

"Where's Cissie?"

"At school."

"Go get her. Bring her home. With the Machines broken down, there's no telling what will happen. That's the reason for the things we've seen, Kay. We're so dependent upon the Machine for the answers that if it breaks down, behavior patterns break down . . . *goddam it!*" He cursed loudly, jamming his foot into the shoe, breaking down the counter in his haste.

Kay watched him anxiously as he talked on, loudly, to himself. "Word must have leaked out. The phone operators. That's the reason for the fires . . . it's like losing faith in God. Only Berke's God was the Machine, and so was the milkman's, and the people who started the fires."

Without another word, he threw on a jacket and headed for the garage. Moments later, he was roaring along the superhighway toward the Semantics Building, the thoughts pulsing in his head. He was only an Information Organizer in one particularized section of the Machine's vast information center. Aeronautical Supply. He and Steinkraus. There was probably equal confusion in every other department, from Cultivation of Hydroponic Citrus Fruits, to Orchestration of Popular Music.

The highway was jammed with automobiles. Gordon could see more pillars of smoke now, rising into the sky all over the city. People were burning things. People were burning the world, here and in China too, and it would spread. My God . . . how it would spread. . . .

Slugs spanged into the windshield of the automobile and Gordon ducked, swerving the wheel to the right. He turned his head to see the group of men crouched by the highway rail. Six of them, with antiquated machine guns, laughing insanely, shooting at the automobiles.

That was the danger, Gordon thought. Emotions bottled up too long. Everybody got crazy urges now and then. Most of them, when they came

out, were harmless. But under the Semantic Plan there was no erratic behavior. The Machines held people in check, giving them directives, but the Machines were broken and the dark fountains were breaking forth. . . .

And most important of all, *Why?* Why would the perfect Machines break down?

Gordon swung the car onto a cut-off. Down below, surrounded by the shaded park and the lagoon and the fountains, stood the Semantics Building, its parking lot crawling with cars, the steps jammed with people running, military men, brain men like himself, newspaper reporters.

He parked the car on the edge of the lot, jumped out and ran for the building. People crowded even the side entrances. He tried to get a lift up to the sixth floor, but only two of the twelve were running. Someone had cut the cables on the others, and three of them, Gordon heard, had crashed down, still carrying loads of people.

Gordon ran up the six flights and kicked open the door of the tiny office. Steinkraus turned, his boyish face distraught, his blond hair wild and unkempt. He stared at Gordon from red-webbed sleepy eyes.

"I've been here since four this morning," Steinkraus told him. He gestured to the Problem Encoder. "I've been feeding this damned thing every kind of problem I could think of. They all work out the same way."

"Let me see," Gordon said.

Steinkraus sat down at the electric typewriter and wrote out an imaginary problem, concerning a shipment of chemical fuel to a mail rocket port in Northern Europe. The answer panel on the side of the room blinked once and letters appeared.

Information received, but no solution can be offered.

The message remained there for a moment and the screen darkened again.

"You see?" Steinkraus told him. "It's the same all over the building. In every department, no solution can be offered. That's why people are going to pieces." He sank down into a foam chair, shaking his head.

"We depended on it too long, that's all. We depended on it too damned long."

The wall speaker hummed.

"Attention. Attention. To all sectors. This is Central Brain Headquarters. Repeat, this is Central Brain Headquarters. A party of men is going below ground to break open the sealed chamber which is supposed to be opened only in time of emergency. Do nothing. Repeat. Do nothing. Await word from us."

There was another faint buzz and the speaker grew quiet.

"I wondered when they'd think of that," Steinkraus said. "You remember about the sealed chamber?"

Gordon nodded. "It was put in both of the Machines when they were built, by the inventors, wasn't it?"

Steinkraus said, "Yes. Nobody ever thought it had anything to do with the operation of the Machine, and nobody could get past the electric barriers anyway. Evidently they've shut themselves off. We always thought it was just some kind of private whim of the men that built this thing. Maybe it's an answer."

"Maybe," Gordon said.

The two of them sat there for a long hour, smoking cigarette after cigarette, watching the white mountains of ash pile in the disposal tray. It was fifteen minutes before eleven when the phone rang.

"It's for you," Steinkraus said to Gordon.

"Hello," Gordon said.

"Gordon, this is Kay. I went to school. Cissie . . . oh God . . ." She was crying.

"Kay! Kay, what's wrong? What happened?"

"The teachers, Gordon. They . . . they locked the children in the school and threw gasoline in the halls and set fire to it. Then they used thermite bombs. There wasn't anything left but . . . but ashes. Cissie . . . oh Gordon, Cissie . . ." Her crying rattled thinly through the telephone.

Gordon stared at the phone dumbly and put it back down on the hook. He turned to Steinkraus, stupid wonder on his face and in his voice.

"Cissie's dead. Her teachers at school burned up all of them."

"We're through, Gordon," Steinkraus said. "We're through. It'll spread all over the world. . . ."

At four minutes after eleven, a message came from Central Headquarters to all sectors. A sound tape had been discovered in the sealed chamber and had been played and digested. The announcer would inform them of the contents.

Steinkraus and Gordon sat there, like all the other men in all the other cubicles, listening to the voice of the announcer, a flat rasping metallic voice with a message from years before when the Machines were built.

". . . the gist of the message," the announcer said. He stopped and giggled insanely and then, regaining his composure, continued, "The message informs us, the people of this time, that the inventors of the Machines decided that the most logical way for running the world was on the basis of a chess problem, with many complicated factors corresponding to the chess pieces. The chance in building the Machine was a great one. The Machine might stop when the *game* was completed, when both kings were

in check at the same time. That is, when all the factors have reached a standstill, canceling out one another. No more conflict will be possible. The Machine will stop solving problems. The inventors believed that life could be reduced to well-ordered chess terms. Hence the two Machines instead of one. The factors have balanced and equaled one another." He paused and Gordon knew that the message proper was over.

"That's it," the announcer said after a moment. "When checkmate came, human behavior was supposed to have reached the maximum in sanity, in normalcy. Well . . ." He giggled again. "The tape goes into a lot of detail. You can come and listen to it if you want to. Central Auditorium. Otherwise, go home. We're closing shop. Nobody can figure out anything to do. That's the official word. Go home. Go. . . ."

Steinkraus slammed his fist into the speaker box, watching it splinter to pieces.

"They tricked us," he yelled. "They took a chance with us. They gambled with us. We've been playing a game. No wonder things have been more and more peaceful. No wonder the armies disappeared, the churches vanished. No wonder . . ." He sat down at the desk, his head in his hands, and cried.

Finally he looked up, staring at Gordon. "Do you realize what day this is? This should be the greatest day in the history of the world. The day when mankind finds the purpose of life. That there is no purpose. And look at us. . . ."

He laughed raggedly.

"I'm going home," Gordon said sickly, wondering of what use the Semantic Integration was any more. A gamble. A game, a chance taken by science years before.

Steinkraus took a gun out of his pocket. "I'm going to celebrate the greatest day of the world. I'm going to celebrate the purpose of life."

Gordon opened and shut the door quickly. There was a shot, and he hurried toward the stairs. Once out in the sunlight, he cut across the parking lot feeling empty, lost. More and more smoke clouds rose on the horizon. People were out in the parks around the Semantics Building, chopping down the trees, tearing up the lawn in a frenzied, irrational way.

He started his car, turning it around. A blue convertible was pulling in ahead of him. Viciously, Gordon stepped on the accelerator and side-swiped the other car. He sat back, grinning. That felt good. Since there was no more logical behavior, then illogic was the answer. Funny how quickly the veneer of training fell away.

Gordon spent the rest of the day riding about the city, seeing the wreck-

age, the terror creeping in the streets, spreading, the people lying in the gutters, the broken windows, the fires.

At noon he stole a quart of whisky from the smashed window of a liquor store.

Impasse, he kept thinking. Kings in check. In China, and here. Spreading. . . .

When he finally went home, the sky was dark, but red bonfire lights burned up into the clouds. Laughing with the liquor inside of him, he drove the car onto the lawn and left it there.

As he was getting out, a shot whined over his head. Gordon ran for the front steps, seeing Dr. Berke behind the curtains in his living-room window, white eyeballs rolling wildly, pistol held up, face colored red by the light in the sky.

Gordon stood on the front porch, giggling. We'll go fast now, he thought. Out fast, like a light, like a quick comet burning. Won't be much left of us any more. Like that old fellow Omar something, talking about laying the chess pieces back in the box. That's us. That's us.

It didn't seem at all strange that his daughter was dead. Nothing anybody did any more seemed strange. He felt, vaguely, that the minds of people had been driven to a state of shock, even as he himself followed the dictates of that state.

The front door was open.

The living room was dark. Through the windows came flickers of red firelight from the sky, dappling the ceiling.

"Kay," Gordon called.

Red eyes gleamed from beside the fireplace.

"Kay, where are you? Kay, oh Kay . . ." He called ridiculously, gayly.

The red eyes blinked. There was laugh, low, moist, animal.

Gordon didn't see his wife with the butcher knife in her hand until it was too late.





This is the story of the God of Scented Pines. It is, moreover, the story of Fo Wen, a coolie whose lovely memories of his dead wife made each new morning a fresh and wonderful thing. For she had been a slender woman with a heart full of goodness, and her smile had been wonderfully sweet.

One-Man God

by FRANK OWEN

A FRAGRANT ink stick, an engraved ink stone and a few brush strokes are all that are needed to tell the story of the God of Scented Pine Trees. Now it must be known that this god reveled in pompous ceremony and was a glorious dignified figure in his silk embroidered robes of sun gold, lush green and purple splendor. He had as many gaudy costumes as there are hours in the round of the year, emblazoned with dragons and unicorns, and exhaling a heady mixture of musk and myrrh and cinnamon, but he was not happy; for alas, only one poor coolie worshiped him. Small wonder then that he was vexed, for gods need worshipers even as men need gods to worship.

The coolie, whose name was Fo Wen, lived in a small mud hut and his most prized possession was a small blackened kettle in which he cooked his rice, and occasionally a bit of turnip to cement together the bones of his emaciated body. But he was unaware that he lacked so much of earth's riches, for each night as he slept on the bare earth his beloved wife returned to him from the realms of her ancestors. Once more they were young and happy because they were together. And so they talked and laughed and were abundantly rich until the moon met the dawn. Ofttimes, Fo Wen wondered whether the dream were the reality or reality the dream even as did Chuang Tzu who dreamed that he was a butterfly who dreamed that he was Chuang Tzu.

Near the hut of Fo Wen stood a stately pine tree. He joyed to sit before his door of an evening, drinking in the beauty of its graceful fronds against the sky. The odor of pine drifted to him and in the far distance he could hear the tinkle of temple bells. At such times abundant peace crept into his soul and he was rich.

But the God of Scented Pine Trees was not happy. Though he was almost barren of worshipers he wished to be kowtowed to in splendor.

Therefore he determined to make Fo Wen, his last suppliant, a very wealthy man. One deep, dark middle of the night, he caused a magnificent garden to appear around the small hut of Fo Wen surrounded by a house of many rooms. The furnishings of these rooms, which opened onto the garden, were of fine lacquer, teakwood and ivory. The soft handwoven rugs of rich, lush colors might have put flowers to shame. In one room was a collection of jewels—diamonds, pearls, jades and nephrites, wrought gold and carved silver, turquoise, amber, jasper and carnelian. On the walls were written pictures and landscapes dating back to the Tang dynasty. Every conceivable luxury was in that palace, besides four slender concubines, versed in the arts of music, dance and song.

Then the god touched Fo Wen gently on the shoulder until he awakened. "Blest are you among mortals," he intoned, "for I, the sole God of Scented Pine Trees, have decided to make you rich."

Fo Wen opened his eyes. He appeared slightly incredulous as he gazed about sleepily.

"Rich," he repeated, "rich, what need have I for more riches?"

"As a coolie, certainly your position was not lofty," observed the god, somewhat irritated.

"I was content."

"Is contentment enough? Gaze about you, this magnificent house and garden is all yours. And there are diamonds beyond price."

"What are diamonds?" asked the coolie.

"Next to jade, the most precious thing on earth."

"The most precious thing on earth is a good wife," said Fo Wen.

"Wives, faugh!" said the god. "What do they amount to? Millions of women in China. All chatter like monkeys. Even the worthy ones fade, shrivel and are gone. But diamonds live forever."

"Only a fool thinks a diamond lives!"

"They sparkle as though alive."

"But have they four souls?"

"No."

"Do they breathe?"

"Who said they did?"

"Can you use them for food when you are starving?"

"Our coolie is becoming a philosopher!"

"If toil makes a philosopher, then I am one."

"You read many books?" asked the god, who somehow felt slightly deflated. Why should not this miserable coolie be abject before him, at the power of his majesty?

"I like to read the graceful poems that are flung so frequently on the

walls of buildings by enthusiasts of the brush. However, I cannot afford to buy books."

The god brightened perceptibly. "Now you are rich, you can buy all the books you want."

"Only one book do I need, the verses of Lao Tzu that I committed to memory as a youth."

THE GOD of Scented Pine Trees felt as though his nose was out of joint. Why had he never thought to write a book? What was a book, anyway, but a mere jumble of words! He was worried almost into hysterics. It was bad enough to have only one worshiper, without having to share his devotion.

He decided that he would treat the book of Lao Tzu as though it was of little importance.

"What did he write that is so memorable?"

Fo Wen reflected for a moment, then he quoted:

*"Do not exalt wealth—
Avoid treasuring rare things."*

The God of Scented Pine Trees broke into a cold sweat. Did this simple coolie realize what he was saying? Surely he could not be so erudite as thus to berate him! Truly, these were difficult days in which to be a god.

He sighed so deeply that it stirred the garden like a breeze.

"Would you like to look through your new house?" he asked brusquely.

"My hut serves my simple needs. Why should I desert it?"

"Because I, thy god, command thee!"

Fo Wen rose wearily to his feet. It had not occurred to him to stand in the presence of the god. Perhaps it was because there was so little in his appearance to command respect. He seemed more worried than regal, he was too fat and gaudily overdressed.

"As you wish," he said without enthusiasm.

"Oh, for a few other worshipers," thought the god, "that I might put this ingrate in his place!" But he remained civil for he badly needed this lone worshiper even though he was so little devout.

"You shall drink from a jade cup," he said.

Fo Wen remained silent. What matter the vessel from which one slakes thirst?

"In your possession will be amber trinkets in which leaves and ferns, insects and lovely flowers are entombed; while all about your home will be gorgeous jade flowers growing, their petals of gems of rainbow colors.

The rugs beneath your feet will be soft as moss and of a green sheen. You will bathe in a crystal bath, the like of which may not be found the world over. You will feast on viands of a piquance and delicacy to entice the appetite of a king."

"Rice alone is sufficient for my needs. Possessions mean nothing to me."

"But you will be rich!"

"Have I ever been poor?"

"You, a coolie, ask that?"

"My sleep is deep, my dreams are pleasant."

"Do you not thank me for this house?"

"I worship you, is not that enough?"

The god coughed. "That is very good," he said in an effort to be off-handed, for how good and necessary it was he did not want Fo Wen to know.

Fo Wen was very tired and somewhat distressed that the Scented Pine Tree God should be so persistent. He had labored hard and now in spite of himself his head slipped gently to the good earth and he slept. The god sighed and departed to those realms where only gods may go.

AT SUNRISE, Fo Wen awakened, cooked a bowl of rice, and then departed for his back-breaking toil from dawn till dusk. Strange, he thought, that a god should build him a great house, he who was but one of the countless teeming millions of coolies of China. What did it mean? What was the reason? What need had he for so large a house now that his wife was no longer with him and he was childless?

To be childless, in China, is looked upon as a real calamity. Childless men usually take unto themselves a secondary wife, or a third until the need for progeny has been fulfilled. But not so Fo Wen. Mei Mei was his beloved wife; even death had not separated them, for she came to him in his dreams. He needed no other woman, wanted no other woman, even as Emperor Ming Huang had eyes for no other woman after beholding Yang Kwei-fei.

Fo Wen was well educated though he had never attended school. His father had taught him to read and write. The beauty of his brush strokes might have brought envy to an artist. Nature, too, had been his teacher. From the wind in the willows he learned sweet songs which he longed to translate into words; from the sky at evening he drew inspiration and serenity; from the glory of scented pine trees he drew faith. So it was but natural he worshiped their god. That the god was all but bankrupt as far as worshippers were concerned, he did not know.

In the early evening, Fo Wen returned to the garden which was sur-

rounded by the various rooms of the magnificent house. He was deeply troubled as he walked through the carved red gates, past the spirit screen, and on toward his crude hut that remained an incongruous blot on the beauty of the garden. He prepared his usual bowl of rice over a wood fire. He ate slowly, trying to fathom the mystery of the god's benevolence. Of what need had he for a palace? He was a coolie, had always been a coolie, and a coolie he would remain until his life ceased.

Had he been endowed with this great house while his wife, Mei Mei, had walked the earth, he would have been ten thousand times thankful for the blessing. It would have meant jewels and silken robes for her. Now, since she had joined her ancestors except during those glorious hours of sleep when she returned to him, wealth meant nothing to him.

As a majestic form stood beside him, he looked up to behold the disgruntled God of Scented Pine Trees.

"Why do you still live in this hovel?" he asked brusquely.

"Because it is my house," was the simple reply. "I belong here."

"I have built you a palace that even would have delighted Kubla Khan. He, too, loved scented pine trees."

"He was an emperor; I, a coolie."

"You are a coolie no longer. Heed my words, live in the house you deserve. I have spoken; it is the least you can do to obey."

Fo Wen found the conversation distasteful. He was amazed that he felt so little awe in the presence of this god whom he had worshiped for so many years. He thought of the words of Lao Tzu:

*Supreme virtue is like pure water.
It is beneficial to all and harmful to none.
It seeks the lowly places abhorred by men.*

He, too, had dwelt in the lowly places yet the God of Scented Pine Trees wished to lift him up to the cold lonely heights of grandeur. Possession of earthly treasures is not enough. If the mind be not fed, what use a fat, sleek body! Again he thought of Lao Tzu:

*The wise man retires quietly from the outer world.
It is then that he experiences the Divine Tao.
When soul and spirit are harmoniously united
They will ever remain one.*

So was it with Fo Wen and his wife, Mei Mei. She had dwelt with him happily for years in the mud and bamboo hut. To him it sang gently of her presence. Here she was near him. He wished no other abode.

But the God of Scented Pine Trees was urgent. Why should the welfare of one poor coolie mean so much to him?

"Tell me," he asked abruptly, "were you once, long ages ago, a member of the Fo clan?"

The god shuddered at the mere thought of such a thing.

"I am an immortal," he said haughtily. "Immortals belong to no clan."

"Then why do you bestow gifts upon me?"

"I am your god. You worship me. You are indeed a worthy man."

"And do you bestow gifts on all who worship you?"

That was a poser. The god might have answered yes with more than a modicum of truth, for Fo Wen was his only worshiper, the slender thread that guarded his divinity.

The God of Scented Pine Trees spoke slowly. "I have come to you because none other is more worthy. You live righteously."

"So do multitudes of coolies in China. He who bears gifts without reason is surely subject to much doubt."

"Wealth means nothing to me. See, I put out my hand and there are gold pieces in it, at my will they appear."

"A magician!"

"In a way," the god conceded. "However, could men live without magic—the magic of flowers, the magic of the little rain of China gently falling, the magic of the night sky, the magic of the caress of a beloved woman, the magic of sleep when day's work is over?"

Fo Wen added, "And greatest of all, the magic of dreams."

"Through all the years you have worshiped me, I have heeded your prayers with compassion. When you burnt incense sticks they were pleasant to my nostrils. I have watched over you diligently that no harm might befall you."

"Yet the greatest disaster struck me."

"I know nothing of disaster."

"My wife has gone from me to her ancestors."

"Was that such a calamity? Why, in yonder house I have placed concubines for your enjoyment so beautiful they put flowers to shame. They belong to you. They are a hundred times more beautiful than your wife. Go to them."

"I want them not. My wife was the most gracious of women. She was attuned to my every wish. Her passing was sorrow beyond words."

The god noticed tears in the eyes of Fo Wen.

"Weeping is for women," he said scornfully.

"The loss of such a woman is occasion enough for weeping."

"Bah!" spat out the god. "Was she such a good wife; did she bear you children?"

"She was the best of wives. That she was childless she could not help. Even though you are a god, say no more against her, else I may curse you."

THE GOD of Scented Pine Trees was in a panic. There was nothing godlike in the manner in which he fawned over Fo Wen. He repeated over and over again that all he wished to do was to show how great was his benevolence. He wanted Fo Wen to be a rich man since his character was so strong and noble.

Fo Wen felt ill at ease. He disliked the god to debase himself before him. In an effort to get out of an untenable position, he promised that that night he would sleep in the palace. At that the god departed triumphantly, hollow triumph though it was, for he had been very close to ignominy.

Fo Wen walked across the garden reluctantly, to the sleeping quarters of the master of the house, but he felt little like a master, more like a slave, the slave of the God of Scented Pine Trees. What kind of a god was this who insisted on controlling the actions of his worshipers? Far better was old Lao Tzu who wrote for all within the Four Seas:

*The Infinite Tao produces and sustains all things.
It claims nothing of what it has produced.
It acts with loving wisdom, without desiring reward.
It possesses all power
Yet it does not seek to control. . . .*

No wonder throughout China so many people were Taoists, regarding Lao Tzu with complete devotion. Truly, Lao Tzu was a philosopher worth revering. He gave so much food for reflection and asked nothing in return.

To please the God of Scented Pine Trees, though with considerable reluctance, he entered the room for sleeping. It was of an elegance that quite captured his breath. A pale lantern hung from the azure blue ceiling like a summer moon. The green rug was as thick and soft as dew-drenched grass at daybreak.

On the walls were written pictures. One in exquisite brush strokes: "How cool moonbeams drip from bamboo leaves." Another, "The color of distant hills—oh, those chrysanthemums!" He meditated a moment before them. Their eloquence he could appreciate. Like all Chinese he had the profoundest respect for the written character.

Quickly he slipped out of his clothes, stretched out on the kong and

drew the silk coverlets over him, nor did he pay any attention to the large golden dragon that was embroidered upon it. Sleep should have come to him at once, for he was very tired, but his eyes did not close. First it was the pale light of the lantern that annoyed him. He was used to sleeping in darkness. The silk coverlets made him uncomfortable. The soft slinkiness was repulsive, almost like a slimy snake's skin. And he wondered why he had permitted himself to be flayed with words into this pretense of grandeur. He was but a coolie, a coolie who loved poetry, flowers, sunsets, the natural loveliness of life. What kind of a god was this God of Scented Pine Trees who forced him into doing that which was abhorrent to him?

He rose from the kong, put on his simple blue clothes and returned to his hut. He stretched out on the bare earth and sighed contentedly. Sleep came to him at once. And now, in his dreams, his wife was beside him and the night was tender with perfume and sweet music.

THE JOY of peace and morning was on the land when he awakened. He walked to the door of the hut and breathed deeply of the clear, cool air. What need had any man for greater riches? He thought ruefully of the God of Scented Pine Trees whom he had worshiped for so many years. Now all that was ended. He would worship him no more, for he was an advocate of false doctrines. He knew nothing of the greatness of simple things, the joy of humility. What need had he for a false god, when there was so much in nature that was fine and true?

Coming toward him was a familiar fat figure, though not wearing his elaborate robes. Now he was arrayed in rags. He prostrated himself before Fo Wen and touched his forehead to the ground.

"Permit me to worship you, O Mighty Sage," he said fervently. "You were the sole remaining worshiper I had. That was why I erected this house for you. I was not satisfied with humble devotion. I wanted to be kowtowed to by a man of prominence. But now all this is over, and I have been flung down from the high places of the gods and reduced to the status of mere mortal. Nor am I dismayed, for I shall follow your guidance and your teachings. You have shown me the meaning of devotion. And so I prostrate myself before you in adoration."

Fo Wen felt strangely uplifted as though he could climb to the sky and walk endlessly among the stars without fatigue. But he checked the impulse. Better far to keep his feet deep-rooted in the earth, even as do scented pine trees. Nevertheless, inexplicably a sudden change had come over the face of the morning.

His vision was more acute, he could see far distances. Far into the deep blue sky could he see unto realms of eternal solitude and peace. Though

the sun was well up, he could behold the moon and the stars, too, shining with breathtaking brilliance. The air was filled with music and voices softly singing. A hand, slim and tender, touched his cheek and he knew that his wife was near him. This was as it should be, for death is as real as life and occasionally more comforting.

That day, Fo Wen did not depart for the docks to take up his usual back-breaking toil. The ex-god went in his place. He wished as far as possible to walk in the footsteps of the coolie who had been the last of his worshipers. Perhaps on that path he would find that which he sought, the way back again to the eternal mountains of the gods.

Fo Wen repaired to the pine tree that stood a short distance outside the walls of the palace. It was a perfect morning to give over to quiet and reflection. The sun was warm, the sky a rapturous blue. The pine trees had never been sweeter-scented. And he thought of the Emperor Ming Huang of the Tang Dynasty; how he had fed the poor by having tubs of rice set out in the market places for distribution among the hungry. That is what he would like to do. At once there was a large tub of rice standing near him, and a beggar was approaching for alms. Unto this man Fo Wen gave a half sheng measure of rice, sufficient to keep him fed for some time. And the beggar bent low before him, murmuring a prayer. "Thank you, noble god, for this great gift."

Fo Wen was warmed by his words. This was the thing he had always longed to do, had he been able to afford it. That day he bestowed rice on many people, thereby giving them the gift of life, for rice is the life blood of China. It is more precious than gold, ivory or carved jade.

All through the day, Fo Wen distributed rice to the poor, and people came to him in ever-increasing throngs, nor did the tub ever become empty. And all who came kowtowed before him in gratitude and prayer, for surely this must be a god who showed such great generosity and compassion. Occasionally Fo Wen uttered bits of verse which the people snatched at eagerly. Thus were they doubly fed.

Day after day, Fo Wen distributed rice under the scented pine tree, and more and more people came to worship at his shrine—a single pine tree. Though he knew his magical powers were increasing daily, he made no effort to disport himself on the mountains of the gods, neither did he wear fine raiment. He still wore the blue clothes that were worn by uncounted millions of Chinese, for he preferred to walk among men that his gifts might be used to ease poverty. And besides him always was a slender woman whose smile was wonderfully sweet.

The Short Count



illustrator:
Everett Raymond Kinstler

The night was filled with bittersweet memories—and the footsteps of the air-raid warden sounded hollowly beneath their window. . . .

by THEODORE R. COGSWELL

"How does this sound?"

"Go ahead," she said.

"I have seen the years pass like frightened men, and now I am afraid." She wrinkled her nose. "You're lifting again."

"Who this time?"

"Eliot. The bang and whimper thing, isn't it?"

He thought for a minute and then wet his finger and drew an invisible line in the air. "Half a point for your side. It is Eliot. *Prufock*, though. Something about the eternal footman holding his coat and snickering."

He picked up the empty pack of cigarettes beside him for the tenth time, fished in it, and then suddenly aware of what he was doing, snorted and threw it in the wastebasket beside his desk.

"Any decent sized butts in your ashtray?"

"Two. But I'm saving them."

"Pig."

"Smoke your pipe. You paid three-fifty for it and you've only used it twice."

"It bites my tongue." He got up and went and got it out of the brass bowl on top of the bookcase. It was filled with charred, half-smoked tobacco. He grimaced and put it back.

"It stinks." He fished around in his own ashtray but there was nothing there over half-an-inch long. He pulled open his desk drawer, took out a thin, translucent second sheet, and carefully tore a long rectangle from one corner. Taking the tobacco from several of the short butts, he shredded it in his palm, poured it into the paper, and deftly rolled a passable cigarette. He eyed it critically. "Not bad."

"I don't see how you can smoke those things."

"Necessity is the toothless mother of. Out of the depression and sired by Spain. I always ate but cigarettes were scarce. In high school we used to have the institution of first and second butts. Nobody was passing out cigarettes then but if you could afford them you were expected to be fairly generous with the fag ends.

"It was a silly damn habit to pick up on a two-bit a week allowance but somehow one felt that a cigarette between the lips and long non-chalant jets of smoke through the nostrils had an almost aphrodisiac effect on the girls who gathered in little clusters on the sidewalk in front of school during the lunch hour. I guess they wore lipstick for the same reason."

"You're half right," she said. "The direction was the same but the drive

was more diffuse. What we primarily wanted—was to be wanted. At least my phantasies were social rather than sexual. I saw myself being taken to smart places by handsome men." She paused and chuckled. "I'll admit that sometimes they took me to their apartments, but that was the end of the evening rather than the beginning."

She closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I'm wearing a jade-green evening gown and we're sitting at a little table in the corner drinking champagne. There's a gypsy violinist playing softly to us and Raoul is pleading with me to marry him. As he talks I can see the curling wrought iron grillwork set in the windows of his hacienda. Gauchos are singing softly behind the stables where he keeps his thoroughbreds. . . . He and I are standing side by side on the balcony and I'm smoking a gold tipped monogrammed cigarette in a long jade cigarette holder." She laughed softly. "If you'd been around, I'd have given you first butts."

There was a sudden flare as his homemade cigarette burst into flame from too hard a drag.

"Damn. They're always doing that."

"Do you want to see it?"

"What?"

"My jade cigarette holder."

"Sure."

"Wait a minute." She got up and went into the bedroom. He found his eyes sliding back to the silent television screen and for a moment he was afraid again. A minute later she came back out carrying a twine-tied cardboard box.

"Hey, don't you ever get tired of staring at that thing?"

He started at the sound of her voice and turned to face her. "It fascinates me. Ten years of wrangling over color television and all we finally get is a pretty amber glow on a blank screen."

"Just be glad it's only amber," she said. "Look." Carefully she untied the string on the box and took the frayed cover off. She set a ribbon-tied package of letters to one side and took out a long slim object wrapped in tissue paper.

"I put this away fifteen years ago." She slowly unwrapped it and passed it to him. It was a long green cigarette holder made of some glasslike substance.

"Ming?"

"Walgreens. They were on sale for eighty-seven cents. I borrowed seventeen cents from Marcy Thomas and bought it. I only used it once."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "From this could come scar tissue. Where?"

"At the Winston Roof after the Senior Prom. Bill Hendricks and I had a corner table. He wandered off for some reason or other and I was left

alone. The setting wasn't all that I had dreamed of—most of the people at the other tables looked like the people next door all dressed up for a night out, but there was soft music and the lights weren't too bright. I was trying to work up nerve enough to take the holder out of my purse, but every time I'd put my fingers on it the lights would seem to get brighter and everybody would seem to be looking at me. Then HE came in and I tensed. Did you ever ten?"

"Ten?"

"You know, when there's something you want to do or have to do but you're scared to do it so you start a long slow count inside your head and promise yourself that when you get to ten you'll do whatever it is that's supposed to be done."

"Only half the time you chicken out and jump to twenty." He grinned reflectively and blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "I got all the way to forty on my first pick-up."

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself. Before you did what?"

"A proper story has a beginning, a middle, and an end," he said sternly.

She tucked her legs under her and curled up like a small grave kitten. "Carry on."

"Bob and I were over on the North Side in his dad's new Terraplane. Women over there were reputed to be easy and eager, and we drove up and down the side streets whistling at the girls. Sometimes they'd look back at us and giggle. We didn't stop though. Bob would say, 'Christ, what a couple of pigs,' or else I'd say it, and we'd drive on sort of relieved. We finally parked by an old beat-up church that had half its windows busted out and sat there listening to the radio. Bob talked about driving out to a roadhouse we'd heard about as being a really rough place, but we both knew they wouldn't let us in so we didn't do anything about it. Then a couple of girls walked by and Bob made a crack. They laughed but kept on going. A couple of minutes later they came by again. This time they stopped and one thing led to another and pretty soon Bob had one in front and I had the other in the back seat.

"We drove out into the country and I was glad of the radio because I couldn't think of anything to say. I kept smoking one of Bob's cigarettes after another, not because I wanted them but because the ritual of lighting and puffing gave me something to do with my hands. She didn't smoke.

"Bob had his arm around his girl. Mine was sitting way over on the other side of the seat kind of stiff like. The two feet between us seemed like a million miles and I couldn't figure out how to get across it. Then Bob took a corner fast and she came tumbling over. When we got untangled I had my arm around her and she didn't seem to mind.

"Then Bob parked on a side road and he and his girl started to kid

back and forth. He'd say something like, 'Boy, am I hot tonight,' and she'd say, 'Don't be a fuel, crank down the window.' And then they'd both laugh like crazy and he'd reach over to her and pretty soon they'd be all tangled up.

"I wanted to try something like that but I was suffering from a sort of personality paralysis. So I started tenning. I must have stretched that count to a good three minutes. When I finally got to ten I couldn't make it so I went on to twenty. The silence kept getting silenter and I couldn't think of anything to say so I kept on counting and waiting for the dam to break."

"The poor girl," she said.

"Poor girl, hell! Poor me. At thirty-nine I almost decided to stretch the count to fifty but I knew that if I did I'd be counting for the rest of the evening, so I pulled her to me and bent my head down. She turned her face up to me and shut her eyes just like in the movies, but her lips were dry and I could feel her teeth through them and neither of us got much out of it. Her name was Edna and she'd eaten something for supper with garlic in it and I could smell the garlic more than I could feel the kiss.

"After we dropped the girls, I climbed up into the front seat and Bob and I started swapping progress reports. I knew darn well he hadn't done anything but fool around a bit but to hear him tell about it you'd have thought he had her stripped.

"I could have had it," he said, 'but she was a pig.'

"Mine was too," I said. 'She was practically begging me; but you know what? She'd been eating garlic. How do you like that?'

"What do you expect from a pig," said Bob."

There was silence in the apartment and then he lifted his head suddenly. "Now how in the hell did I get off on that?"

She laughed. "You were tenning."

"Oh, yeah. So were you. Sorry to cut in on you like that."

"Don't give it a thought. It's all out of the same cloth." She looked down at the long green cigarette holder and twisted it reflectively between her fingers. "You made out better than I did. I wasn't able to salvage anything.

"He was tall and dark and he wore his tuxedo beautifully. He stood by the entrance as if he were waiting for somebody. Then he shrugged his shoulders and started across the room in my direction. I reached in my purse for the holder, but my fingers froze so I started tenning. He stopped at somebody's table and said something. They offered him a chair but he shook his head. I tenned twice before I got the holder out. There was a panicky minute when I couldn't get the cigarette in but I finally made it. It took two matches to get it going.

"He started across the floor again. I could see he was going to walk right by my table and I was all set. I put a bored expression on my face, tilted my head, lifted my beautiful jade holder, and after inhaling slowly, started to let the smoke trickle out through my nostrils."

There was a sudden shrill of a whistle from the street and an angry voice roared up. "Hey, you on third! Either close those curtains tight or switch off your lights. You're letting enough light through to be spotted ten miles away."

"I wonder if he means us," she said.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Turn off the lamp."

"I don't like to smoke in the dark. Shut the window. The wind must be blowing the black-out curtains open."

"It'll be too hot in here with no air," he protested.

"So you can mix yourself a cold drink. Hurry up before he puts a couple of bullets through the window. The wardens have been getting awfully jumpy the last week or so."

"Can't blame them," he said and shut the window.

"Mix me one while you're at it."

"I don't want a drink, I want a decent smoke. I wonder if McGarvy's is still open."

"Even if he is, it won't do you any good. You'd be lucky to get half way there before some guardsman potted you for a chutist."

He sighed, tore another rectangle from the second sheet, and began to poke around in his ashtray for the most presentable of the remaining butts.

"Look," she said, "do you want to hear the rest of this story or don't you!"

"What story?" he asked vaguely as he licked the white cylinder. He examined it and then stuck out his tongue and licked it again. "Takes a lot of spit to make these things hold."

"My story, you dope. The story of the green jade cigarette holder."

He flicked his lighter, puffed, and coughed. "Go ahead."

"As he came by the table I looked up at him through half-closed eyes and smiled mysteriously."

"And?"

"He stopped dead in his tracks and said 'Jesus Christ' so loud that everybody heard him and looked at me. He was a gentleman, though, he didn't laugh even though the rest of them did. He just got a strangled look on his face and made a bee-line for the men's room."

"That was a sadder story than mine."

"I don't know, he hadn't been eating garlic. At least I assume he hadn't."

"Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"Cigarette fell apart."

There was a sudden distant barking as the guns out beyond the airport began to thud away. The amber "alert" glow on the television screen was replaced by an angry red.

"Bill."

"Yes?"

"How fast does sound travel?"

"Seven or eight hundred miles an hour. Why?"

"If it should hit down by the depot, how long would it be before we could hear it?"

"Isn't that a rather academic question?"

"I want to know."

"Five or six seconds I guess."

She switched out the lamp. "Open the curtains, I want to see."

"I thought you were interested in hearing."

"I want to see it when it hits."

"All right." He pulled open the curtains and raised the window.

"The breeze has stopped."

There were flashes and distant crackles directly overhead.

"They're coming in high. You might as well smoke that butt you've been hoarding. There's no use saving it now."

"Can I use my green jade cigarette holder?"

"If you'll save me first butts."

"It's a deal."

There was a spurt of flame in the darkness and then the red glowing tip of the cigarette.

"I hate to smoke in the dark."

"Turn on the lamp."

"What about the warden?"

"To hell with the warden. That's better." She blew a puff of smoke in his face.

"Maybe if we went down in the basement . . ."

"With the new heavy ones?"

"I guess you're right," he said. "Hey, save me a drag! You're a pig."

"Deodorized, though. Count to ten."

"It won't last that long."

"Count fast."

"One."

The sky toward the depot turned to sun.

"Here, darling. I'm not a pig."

"Four."

"Kiss me!"

"Sev . . ."

